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CONTENTS FOR APRIL, 1941 VOL. IV NO. 6

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The readers speak their minds.

Illustrations by: Cartier, R. Isip, and Schneeman

All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.

Bimonthly publication issued by Street & Smith Publications, Incorporated, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City. Allen L. Grammer, President; Henry W. Ralston, Vice President; Gerald H. Smith, Treasurer and Secretary. Copyright, 1941, in U. S. A. and Great Britain by Street & Smith Publications, Inc. Subscriptions to Countries in Pan American Union, $1.10 per year; elsewhere $1.50 per year. We cannot accept responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts or artwork. Any material submitted must include return postage.

Printed in the U. S. A.

STREET & SMITH PUBLICATIONS, INC. ○ 79 7th AVE NEW YORK

NEXT ISSUE ON SALE APRIL 25th $1 A YEAR 20c per COPY

OF THINGS BEYOND

MAN being perverse, if a thing is a little hard to come by, then that's all the more reason to go out and get it. Some such perversity seems to have bitten me; having had some difficulty in finding out just what a gnome really was, the exact characteristics of the various other inhabitants of folklore became attractive.

The banshee was one I'd been vaguely wondering about for some time. I knew he, she or it was some type of Irish omen of death, but details—

The banshee—properly the *bean-sighe* or woman-fairy—was traditionally a supernatural, family retainer in a sense. The ancient and noble Irish families had their banshees, a woman fairy who had become attached to the family and mourned the deaths of the members, wherever they might be. The traditional mourning of the Irish women was *keening*, a wailing dirge, mixed with hand clapping and weeping.

The fairy woman, in her affection for the family and its members, naturally mourned their deaths, weeping, screaming and beating her hands. But since, by her supernatural knowledge, she knew of the event before its happening, her eerie howls of mourning began usually several days before the fatal hour.

Occasionally the banshees were seen near the home castle or manor of the family; usually they were only heard wailing outside the windows, a dismal cry of death and mourning, a week or more before the final hour, that filled the family with dread. Sometimes—but not always—she would wail the name of the soon-to-die. More often there was only the ominous keening and beating of hands telling all that soon one of them must die, and the others join the chorus of mourning.

The Irish banshee always appeared—when seen—as an old, old woman, with long white hair, and tear-streaked face, keening, screeching and clapping her hands. Sometimes her robes appeared dull and black; sometimes they were misty white among the hedges. But whether she appeared visibly or not, the doleful shrieks of the banshee outside the windows was sure sign of death coming fast to someone of the family.

The Welsh had a similar warner-of-death, but one still less pleasant as a visitation. The *Gwrach y Rhibyn*, the Hag of the Dribble, was their omen of death. Like the banshee, she attended the noble families, screaming and howling beyond the windows as death was near. But her seamed and ancient hag's face mounted a

monstrous body; as she screamed her lament, she beat great leathern wings together. The flap and slap of wings against the window, the keening wail, and the piercing call of the *Gwrach y Rhibyn* meant death, too—but she, for all her fearsome aspect, had this more pleasant characteristic: she called the name of the one soon to die. In a broken, howling, wavering voice, she called out the fatal name, interspersed with the wailing dirge of lament.

But banshee or *Gwrach y Rhibyn*, the keening of the supernatural visitor meant death—death soon and inevitable to one or another of the noble family so "blessed."

The worst of the banshee or its Welsh equivalent was the complete inutility of their moaning. Since they mourned only for deaths that their supernatural faculties permitted them to know would take place, the keening did not constitute a warning. It was simply that most unwelcome of prophecies—a sentence of inescapable doom.

Further, since the banshee knew when the person would die, she knew equally when death would not occur. Thus if some serious accident, or near-death illness was due, the banshee simply neglected to wail even the mildest moan. She knew it was all going to come out all right, even if the unhappy sufferer and family sat around in unpleasant tension wondering when the keening of the invisible mourner would start.

As a disturbing influence in life—and death—the banshee's keening could scarcely be surpassed. The Hag of the Dribble places second, perhaps, since she, at least, took the trouble to tell who was about to pass out.

Personally, I'll get along better without either.

THE EDITOR.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

UNKNOWN ANNOUNCES A BOOK

"Lest Darkness Fall," by L. Sprague de Camp, Henry Holt & Co., New York, 1941. $2.50.

The first of Unknown's novels to be brought out in book form, "Lest Darkness Fall" represents also the first of a new series of fantasy novels Henry Holt & Co. is planning to bring out. Plans are under way to bring out more of Unknown's long novels in the new series.

The book form of "Lest Darkness Fall" is somewhat longer, somewhat changed. There are certain possibilities in the development of the situation presented by a modern man tumbled unceremoniously into the time of Rome's ultimate fall, which the magazine could not exploit. In reworking the material for the book publication, de Camp expanded it by about twenty-five percent, introducing several new characters.

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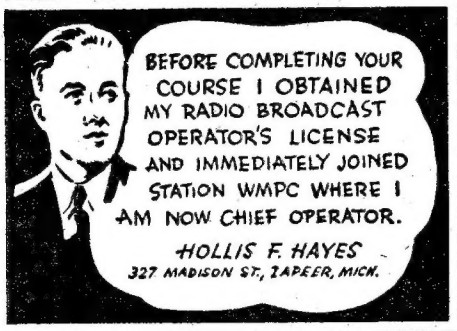
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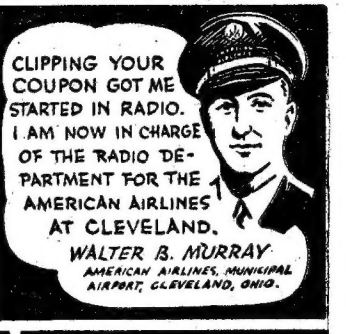
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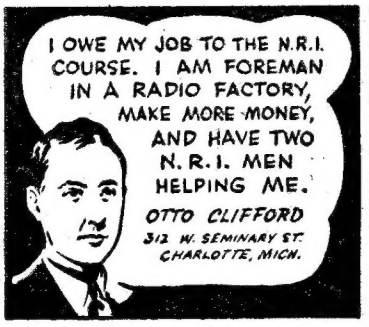
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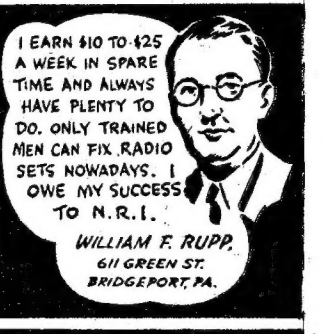
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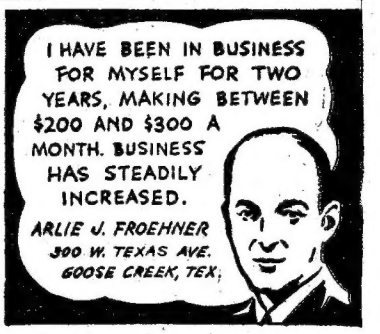
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THE CASTLE OF IRON

● It wasn't Harold Shea's idea this time, but he got stuck in a wackey world where magic worked—and carpets flew!

by L. SPRAGUE de CAMP and FLETCHER PRATT

HAROLD SHEA reached down to rub an ankle. Then he remembered that the itch was the remnant of a fine dose of poison ivy, acquired in the land of Faerie.

He grimaced. "As far as I know," he said, "Doc Chalmers is still fussing around in that lab with the basilisk, trying to turn his snow-girl into a real one. They probably made him head of Gloriana's F. B. I. since he strangled half the Enchanters' Chapter with those disembodied hands. I still dream about those hands.

Walter Bayard opened his eyes and put out a hand. He looked like an

uncommonly dopey ex-football player. He was an ex-football player, but dopey hardly described his slow-going but precise mind. He said: "It would be interesting to speculate whether a basilisk could act on a girl made of snow. However, I notice a curious reluctance on your part to discuss this girl you teamed up with. Belphebe, was that her name?"

Shea reached for his ankle again, then smoothed his dark hair instead. He shrugged: "Said she was going to marry some local cluck named Timias."

Bayard half closed his eyes. "You stepped out because you heard she was engaged to someone else? Not like you, Harold. What's the real dope?"

"It wasn't that alone. I tried to explain. The spell I worked on Grantorto blew me back here, whether I liked it or not. Now I'm here, I don't think I can get back. I've worked up too much magico-static potential. Couldn't stay there; and, by the time I got there, she'd probably be an old married woman, anyway."

He flung out an arm. "Don't you see? The time-space vectors that correspond to all these coexistent universes—the world of Scandinavian myth I visited, the world of the Faerie Queene, where Doc is now—they're roughly parallel, but full of kinks and sine-waves. So you never know but what the relationship between our world and that of Faerie is such that a short lapse of time here corresponds to a long period there. I'd have to work for weeks to find the proper formula. And—"

"Defeatist!" said the third young psychologist. He was a short fellow with a brush-cut, a round face and an expression of perpetual surprise. His name was Vaclav Polacek. To his face his colleagues called him "Votsy," but behind his back "the Rubber Czech" or "the Bouncing Extravert."

"Me?" snapped Shea. "Go chase yourself. She had her choice and she made it. If she prefers this dope Timias—"

"Heh, heh, I'm smirking," said Polacek. "You never gave her a chance. What do you expect her to do, fall into your arms? Listen, Walter, I got an idea. Let's take Harold back to Faerie and—"

"Let's not," said Shea angrily. "You run your own love-life, or love-lives, and let me run mine. Right now I'm interested in what the Garaden Hospital thinks of these absences of ours."

Bayard spread his hands. "We've simply avoided making a point of them. If anyone asks, we say you're off doing research. Votsy and I have completed a lot of Doc's reports, and we're feeding them out as the demand arises. As long as the hospital gets a report now and then, they don't care how their Institute of Psychological Research does the work."

Polacek said: "But now that Doc's out of the picture for good—"

Pfmp!

There was a roar and whirling lights. All three stomachs did a flip.

IF THEY had had any warning, they might have taken the precaution of standing up. As it was, they arrived in the posture of men sitting on chairs, but with no chairs beneath them.

"Ouch!" yelped Polacek.

Shea felt himself spanked hard by a marble floor. He braced himself to get up and looked around.

It was marble all right. There was more of it in every direction, black and white. It stretched out in a tessellated pattern to where pillars leaped out of it, slender and graceful, supporting a series of horseshoe-shaped Moorish arches. The pillars were of some translucent stone that might be alabaster or even ice. As Shea turned his head, he could see how they cut the whole place into an endless series of colonnades, one behind the other in every direction. Oriental, he thought. At the side to which his back had been turned, he noticed the eunuchs.

They must be that. There were a pair of them, loathsomely fat, wearing turbans on their heads and blue silk bloomers on their legs. Each had a long, curved sword. They smiled and bowed to the three young psychologists now picking themselves off the floor and one of them clapped his hands.

Shea bowed back. As he straightened up he saw a file of broad-faced, butter-colored men coming through the maze of translucent pillars. They carried a collection of zithers, brass gongs and outrageous-looking stringed instruments.

Bayard's face was grim. He gripped Shea by the arm.

"Look here, Harold," he said, "did you work one of your damned symbolic-logic formulas on us?"

"I did not," said Shea. "But maybe somebody—"

The end of the sentence was lost in a terrific racket as the musicians all struck up together in an ear-racking combination of squeaks, growls, groans and howls. Simultaneously a door seemed to have opened somewhere behind the colonnades. A breeze fluttered the musicians' garments; underneath their squallings came the sound of distant, rushing waters.

"Oops," said Shea. "Here comes Room Service."

A dark-skinned dwarf, with a big aigrette held to his turban by an emerald clip, scuttled toward them, his arms filled with cushions. He flung them down on the floor, salaamed and was gone. The music changed abruptly, all the instruments together emitting seven repeated, high-pitched notes. Among the pillars, in the direction the dwarf had disappeared, there was a flicker of motion. It developed into—seven girls.

They were in Oriental costume, but not the kind pictured in calendars, except as to cut and color. Their long, loose pajamas were of the heaviest wool. So were the veils that covered all but seven pairs of black eyes. The capers they were cutting could, only by courtesy, be called a dance.

"Hi!" said Polacek, looking interested.

"*Mmmpf!*" said Bayard.

Shea grinned. "Relax, Walter, and sit down. Learn to take things as they come."

Bayard squatted, but said in a low voice: "I hate to think of what would happen if he got loose in a harem."

Polacek overheard. "But I enjoy thinking of it," he commented innocently. "Wonder how you say, 'Hi, toots!' to these babies. S'pose they speak *English?*"

"You're probably not speaking English yourself," replied Shea. "You only think you are. I found that out the first time I tried this symbolic-logic stunt. Look."

The seven had pranced off among the pillars. Another set of dancers were emerging. They wore ankle-length trousers and loose, embroidered coats. Their veils were thinner, too. "Hi, toots!" said Polacek tentatively, but the girls only smiled, danced around and out, to be replaced by seven more.

"How long is this going to keep up?" demanded Bayard as the fifth or sixth cootch-chorus was going through its act.

Shea shrugged. "I don't know. Honest."

As though in answer, the orchestra changed tune. One man dropped his instrument and emitted a series of long-drawn wails. Out from among the pillars came three girls, each with a small tray holding a fancy jar. Bayard gasped; Polacek whistled. The costumes of all three would have gone into a pocket and left room for a wallet and a bunch of keys.

The girls waltzed delicately up to the three visitors. They bowed three times, and with the precision of so many Rockettes, flopped among the cushions at the feet of the three. Keeping time to the music, each whipped the lid from her jar, stuck her finger into it, withdrew it covered with something yellow and gooey and thrust it at her customer's face.

Shea opened his mouth and got a fingerful of honey. He heard Bayard gag and cry "No!" and turned in time to see him trying to avoid the finger. His houri seemed determined to administer the stuff either internally or externally.

"Better take it, Walter," advised Shea.

"But I don't like sweets!" protested Bayard. "I'd rather have beer and pretzels!" He made a face and gingerly accepted a small dose of the sticky mess as the houri patted his knee with her other hand, cooing "Nice boy! Nice boy!"

The orchestra leader clapped his hands again and from among the pillars the dwarf, who had brought the cushions, came trundling toward them with a big tray on which rose three ornate silver flagons. Bayard raised his head to peer into them and emitted a groan from his shoetops.

"Milk! It needed just that to top off his mess. I don't want to go to heaven! Good Lord!"

SHEA, glancing across the head of his own houri, who had leaned back against his knee to pass him the flagon, saw that if it was milk, it was of a peculiar kind, with small congealed lumps floating in it. Before he could experiment, there came a shout from Polacek: "Holy smoke, you guys try this stuff! Best cocktail I ever tasted."

It was, and highly alcoholic. Shea looked down at his girl, who was waiting demurely but thirstily for him to pass the flagon. "What kind of milk do you call this, little one?"

"Milk of Paradise, Lord," she replied and took a gulp.

Bayard heard. "Harold! Votsy!" he cried. "I'll bet you anything I know where we've landed. Don't you remember—

> '—For he on honeydew hath fed
> And drunk the milk of Paradise.'"

"I'm not sure—"

"Well, I am. This is Coleridge's 'Xanadu.'

> 'In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
> A stately pleasure-dome decree,
> Where Alph, the sacred river ran—'"

"Alph! Alph!" The girls scrambled to their knees and bowed in the direction of the sound of rushing water.

"That's it, all right," said Shea to their backs. "But Walter! That puts us in a jam. You remember the poem was unfinished. It might refer to an incomplete universe, one that is fixed in a certain set of actions, like a phonograph needle in a groove. If that's the case, this performance might go on forever."

Bayard put both hands to his head, but Polacek leaned over, waving an empty flagon. He cried happily, "Suits me. We'll make out all right, won't we, babe?"

The girl smiled, but as the orchestra struck a strident note, picked up her tray with the others and whisked away. Another group of seven dancing girls emerged from the pillars.

"But look here, Harold," said Bayard, "can't you do something about this? You've been telling us how good you are at magic. It would be pretty grim if we had to stay here watching this bum vaudeville for the rest of our lives."

"I can try," said Shea doubtfully. "I don't know how it'll work, with this racket going on."

A flush ran up Bayard's face. "I'll get rid of it for you," he said purposefully. He leaped to his feet, and in two bounds had crossed the floor to seize a scimitar from one of the astonished eunuchs. In two more he was upon the musicians. They stopped with a squeal and murmur of voices; the current dancers screamed. But Shea was twisting his friend's wrist. "Drop it! Drop it!"

Bayard let the weapon clang to the floor. "You utter . damned jackass!" remarked Shea evenly. "Want to get us all impaled on stakes, or something? You can't rush the game like that. Now, get back there on the cushions and let me try to think the way through."

"Sorry." Bayard relaxed. "You're right, of course. That Milk of

Paradise was pretty heady stuff, and I guess I'm not the man of action of this crowd." He flung himself down on the cushions and half closed his eyes.

"O. K.," said Shea. "Go to sleep, if you like. I'll try the sorites. If there is something, *c*, such that the proposition *phi* concerning *x* is true when *x* is *c* but not otherwise, and *c* has the property *phi*, the term satisfying the proposition *phi* concerning *x*—" His voice trailed off and he sat with his lips moving. Bayard closed his eyes. Even Polacek stifled a yawn, in spite of the fact that seven hip-dancers were going through amazing wriggles before his eyes.

But Shea's sorites was never completed. Through the domed building, far among the arches, rang the thunder of a cosmic voice—the kind of voice God might have used in telling the worshipers of the Golden Calf where to head in. It said: "Oh, goodness gracious, I do believe I've made a mistake!"

It was the voice of Reed Chalmers.

Shea and Polacek leaped to their feet. The musicians stopped; the dancers paused.

Then musicians, dancing girls, pillared hall began to go round, faster and faster; until they dissolved in a rioting whirl of color. The color faded to foggy gray. The gray threw up whorls that became condensations of other color, and faded into the outlines of another room—a smaller room, bare and utilitarian.

Shea and Polacek were facing a table. Behind it sat a short man and a pale, lovely, dark-haired girl. The man was Dr. Reed Chalmers. He looked younger than when Shea had last seen him, with touches of color in his unruly gray hair where it disappeared beneath a turban.

He said, "I am glad to see you, Harold. I hoped— Oh, for goodness' sake, did I get Vaclav, too?"

II.

"YEAH, sure you got me," said Polacek. "Walter, too."

"But where is he?" demanded Shea, looking around. "He was asleep— Holy dewberries, Doc! He must be still back there in Xanadu, watching shimmy dancers and eating honeydew. He hates both of them!"

"Xanadu? Dear me, most unfortunate, most distressing." Chalmers fingered the papers before him. "I desired to establish contact with you, Harold, and I assure you the association of the others was quite accidental. I really don't know—"

"Hello, Florimel," Shea interrupted. "You don't know the Rubber Czech, do you? Lady Florimel the Second, I present Vaclav Polacek."

"Hail, fair squire," replied the girl. "Is it that Rubber Czech is a title of nobility in your land? And whence, Sir Harold, gat you so strange a garb?"

Shea became conscious of a neat pin-striped lounge suit. "Just what we wear in my universe. But seriously, Doc, what are we going to do about Walter?"

"I uh . am afraid I am uncertain, Harold. He has neither experience nor mental background for inter-universal travel. As his mind is not attuned, I should have the utmost difficulty in locating him. A most serious problem, which unhappily comes just at the moment when I am preoccupied with another, to aid in the solution of which I summoned you here. I—"

"Where's *here*, Doc?"

"You are so hasty, Harold. Allow me to organize my thoughts and my data. After your unfortunate disappearance from Faerie—I take it that it was *you* who demolished Grantorto?—I discovered that the problem of transforming a human simulacrum made of snow into a real person was rather beyond my knowledge of magic. As we were unfortunately obliged to destroy most of the Enchanters' Chapter, there was no aid to be looked for.

"It therefore occurred to me—"

"I wanna sit down," observed Polacek.

"Vaclav, you are even worse than Harold at interruptions. Seat yourself on the floor and kindly permit me to continue. Upon examination of available data, I was gratified to discover that there existed in Faerie the mental pattern of a universe whose space-time vector arrangement made it possible of attainment from Faerie by the familiar methods of symbolic logic. To wit, that of Ariosto's 'Orlando Furioso.

"Why should that be any easier to get to them—" cut in Shea.

"Ahem. I was about to explain. Lodovico Ariosto was an Italian poet who wrote the 'Orlando Furioso' in the early sixteenth century. This work was considered the main source from which Spenser, a highly imitative writer, secured the ideas he wrote into 'The Faerie Queene.' Since each of these universes contains the same basic mental pattern, it is easy to perceive how transference from one to the other would be a relatively light task. I perceive you are not following me, Vaclav."

"No, said Polacek, "and I don't believe Lady Florimel is, either."

"It's not necessary that she should. For your benefit, however, I will explain that this similarity of basic mental pattern establishes, as it were, certain connective roads between the two universes, over which passage in our vehicle of symbolic logic can be achieved with reasonable certainty of reaching the desired destination."

Polacek fidgeted. "I'll grant your explanation, Doc. We'll assume I'm not dreaming, and had a meal of milk and honey served by Hedy Lamarr back there. But why are we in the 'Orlando Furioso'? Sounds like one of Mussolini's poodles getting ready to bite somebody."

"That," said Chalmers, "is uh elementary. We rather exhausted the stock of magicians in Faerie, so I chose this universe as one containing some excellent and highly skilled specimens. I felt I owed a duty to this young lady here." He indicated Florimel. He blushed as Shea snickered.

"Been rejuvenating yourself, haven't you?" said Shea.

Chalmers blushed still more. "It seemed expedient, in view of the demands of my . uh more active recent life upon the physique. I was, as you perceive, conservative in my application of the formula, not wishing to become a pimpled adolescent by inadvertent overdose.

"But to continue: We are, specifically in the castle of the leading magician of the 'Furioso,' Atlantès de Carena, in the Pyrenees, near the Franco-Spanish border. These places, I should warn you, are not the same as those we should uh understand by the same terms as used in our own world."

"What do you want us for, Doc?" asked Shea. "Having trouble with this guy and want me to crown him?"

"Not precisely. Working with Atlantès has been most interesting, most

interesting, though he was suspicious at first, wrongly assuming we were looking for a young woman who recently visited him. I have been granted the opportunity of correcting many of the principles of magic in view of the somewhat different laws that control it here.

"However, Atlantès has not succeeded in doing anything for Florimel, and I am beginning to become dubious as to his intentions. I hope I am less easily impressed by an enchanter's affability than formerly. I . uh feel I owe you an apology, Harold, and above all, you, Vaclav—"

"Don't mind me," said Polacek with a wave of his hand.

"—for transporting you here. But the fact is that you have a certain rule-of-thumb skill in human contacts, a certain ability in the psychology of character. I should like you to ascertain, if possible, whether Atlantès is as able as he claims; and if so, whether he is as well-disposed as he says.

"The fact is that his one serious attempt to do something for this young lady resulted in turning her into a statue of ice, and I had the greatest difficulty in getting her back to her present form before she melted.

"Moreover, there has been a series of events which make me inclined to believe that Atlantès desires to uh keep me on the string and use me. He has hinted that this castle is in imminent danger of being attacked by an expedition of knights. On two or three occasions a hippogriff has flown over, and Atlantès has become much agitated. I should describe him as even being frightened. Also, there is a young man here named Roger, a most unpleasant person, who has revealed a certain uh attraction for Florimel."

"Can't blame him for that," said Polacek.

"No. But I should hate to be in the position of being the uh . . . only barrier that kept Roger from obtaining Florimel. In short, I felt the need of support, and I hope you will pardon my method of seeking it."

Harold Shea stood up. "O. K., Doc. What's the next step?"

"I think it would be uh desirable to introduce you to the other personages here."

CHALMERS came around the desk and opened the door behind them. He led the way down a gray-walled passage. Shea sniffed a faint odor of olive oil. As they stepped across the threshold, his feet gave back a metallic ring from the floor. He looked up in surprise.

"Ah, yes," said Chalmers. "Perhaps I omitted to mention the fact that this castle is built of iron. It uh involves certain problems. This way."

Another passage branched from the first and led down a ramp toward a pair of double doors. As they approached the doors, Shea heard a wailing sound that gave him the creeps until he decided it came from a musical instrument. It did. The double doors opened at a wave of Chalmers' hand. They were looking at a pair of Arab-dressed musicians squatting on the floor, one with a tootle pipe, the other with a drum about four inches in diameter, on which he was tapping with his fingertips. Beyond, a slinky dark girl in gauzy drapes was going through the paces of a slow dance.

Beyond her again a dozen or more men, dressed in brightly colored Oriental costumes which seemed to have been specially spotted with grease for the occasion, were seated on cushions. All gazed at the dancer unsmilingly. From time to time they looked toward the farther end of the room, as though to take their cue from the man who sat there. He was bigger than the biggest of them. He had the figure of a wrestler; his young face wore

a sulky, petulant expression. A little dapper graybeard, like a brown mouse, was whispering something in his ear to the accompaniment of fierce gestures.

The latter glanced up as the visitors entered. He trotted across to them. He bowed low before Chalmers. "The peace of God be with you, Sir Reed." He bowed again.

Chalmers returned the bow. "And to you also, most magical lord of Carena. These are two friends of mine uh Sir Harold de Shea, and the esquire, Vaclav Polacek."

"Indeed!" said Atlantès de Carena. "I am charmed!" *Bow.* "I am delighted!" *Bow.* "Ah, but this is surely my most happy day!" *Bow.* "That you, great lords, should visit my humble dwelling!" *Bow.* "Oh, what fortunate conjunction of the planets has brought about this glorious event!" *Bow.*

Shea and Polacek tried to keep up with the bows. The more they tried, the more determined the enchanter appeared to outbow them. So they gave up. Undisturbed, the little brown man took each by the hand and led them around the circle. He introduced them to Lord Mosco, Duke Thrasy, Lord Margean, Sir Auldrad—this one wore a medieval European costume, with no turban. The Seigneur of Carena reached the cushion that supported the sulky youth. "And this," he cried, "is our own peerless Roger, the perfect paladin and cavalier of Carena!"

The perfect paladin gave a bored grunt. "At least," he said to Atlantès, "let us hope they're more amusing than that red-haired vixen with the bow." Shea stiffened, flooded with sharp, sweet memory. Red-haired girl with a bow? He knew one and only one—but Roger was addressing him directly: "Who are you, the new clowns? I'm not in the mood for clowning, but I'll watch your tricks."

Shea's eye lighted dangerously. "Listen, funny face," he snapped, "you come outside and I'll show you a few tricks!"

Roger, surprisingly, broke into a smile. "You want to fight? Good! Let us be at the hand-play. For months I've slain no man, and I rot from lack of practice."

"No, no, no!" said Atlantès. "No fighting in the castle, Roger. And these noble lords are guests and magicians, ah, how dear to me! Come, sieurs, I myself will squire you to your rooms—poor quarters for lords so noble, yet the best I can offer."

He clucked ahead of them like a motherly hen. The "poor quarters" turned out to be rooms the size of auditoriums, elaborately hung with silk and furnished with inlaid wood. But the rivet heads protruding through the iron plates in walls and ceiling reminded Shea of the interior of a warship.

Atlantès was soothing. "I implore you, noble and magical sirs, take not offense at Roger. Ah, lovely youth!" He brushed a hand past his eyes. Shea was surprised to see a genuine drop of moisture on it. Atlantès went on: "So strong! So brave! Yet, as with all youth's courage, a trifle—shall

we say, bloodthirsty? But so generous. This poor structure, such as it is, was built for him. And now, I leave you with the peace of God."

He bowed half a dozen times in quick succession, and disappeared.

III.

"Hey, Harold!" called Polacek. "Are we supposed to wear these nightshirts?"

"Why not? It doesn't pay to be a freak."

"O. K. if you say so. That little wizard's a smart guy. Say, what's this, a scarf?"

Shea picked up the long red strip of textile. "I think it's a turban," he offered. "You have to wind it around your head, something like this."

"Sure, I get it," replied Polacek. He whipped his own turban around with nonchalant speed. Naturally it came apart and fell around his neck. Another try fared no better. He made a humorous face. "Guess I'll have to wait till they dish out some real hats. Say, do you know the rules in a place like this? I'd like to meet that little dancer down there. She's—"

The door was flung open with a clang by a man whose hairy, pendulous-eared head was similar to that of a Newfoundland dog. He gave no time for staring. "Lord Roger!" he barked, and stood aside to let the perfect paladin and cavalier saunter in.

"Oh, hello," said Shea, a trifle coldly.

Polacek added: "Say, I'm a stranger here myself, but do you always walk in without knocking?"

"I do," replied Roger, as though his name were Vanderbilt. He turned toward Shea. "I heard Sir Reed call you knight; and in good sooth, knightly was your offer to give me an hour's pleasure of battle. I trust you will not take offense should I give you some such handicap as having my left arm tied."

Shea was quite ready to tell Roger he would be happy to meet him with both arms and legs. But he remembered that Doc Chalmers needed help, and he did not have with him the épée that had served him so well in Faerie. Instead of snapping out a defiance, he bowed:

"Thanks. Nice of you. Tell me something—is Atlantès a relative of yours, or something?"

"He calls himself uncle." Roger tapped elegant fingers over a yawn. "More like is he to a father—one of many crotchets. Perhaps I should say a grandmother rather. Would you change from those clownish garments?"

Shea kept his temper under control. "Uh-huh. Say, what's going on, anyway? Sir Reed says Atlantès is worried about something, knights maybe."

"Ha! The knights I fear not. But I am no magician, and in good sooth this castle is no bed of roses since Duke Astolph stole Uncle Atlantès' hippogriff—" Roger ended with a yawn.

Shea sat very still, his eyes boring into Roger. "What was that you

mentioned about a red-haired girl with a bow?" he asked with elaborate casualness.

Roger did not notice. "Oh, aye; as you know, Atlantès is, of all men, the most notable bug and wizard, forever using his strange craft to find me new amusement. Faugh! As though a man and warrior cared for such shams and shows." He spat on the floor. " 'Twas during Lord Dardinell's visit, ere Astolph spoiled Atlantès of his eagle-horse. Atlantès fetched this huntress, or whatever she was, from some far place to beguile my desires. A well-formed wench, but most unmaidenly. I give not a bezant for such. Though this I'll say, ha-ha; she cozened my little old goat of an uncle most daintily."

"How was that?" asked Polacek.

"Oh, slapped a brace of arrows through the drawbridge keeper and walked out of the place as free as air, ere Atlantès could bring his spells to bear. One of our hunters spied her walking with Duke Astolph in the mountains, which makes Atlantès much to fear. No fool he! He thinks it may fall in her mind to come back riding the hippogriff and skewer him with a shaft out of despite."

Shea's heart was pounding. "Did you learn her name?"

"Aye, Belphégor, or some outlandish style like that."

"Not Belphebe?"

"Belphégor, methinks, I wot not well, having had but a glimpse of her. Of good height, with hair of red gold; but to my taste too spare. Give me a good, round, bouncing dame, with curves the eye can follow, not one of these spear shafts." Roger stood up and made for the door. He turned as a thought struck him. "Remember, Sir Knight, that I am master here. Should this wench fall into our hands again, like her or not, she's mine." He strolled out, and the dog-headed man pulled the door to behind him.

Polacek said: "Say, Harold, isn't that the girl—"

But Shea, listening until Roger's footfalls died away, jumped up and bolted out the door, ignoring the Rubber Czech. Shea dashed down to Chalmers' laboratory. Sure enough, the doctor was there, puttering and singing:

"We've a first-class assortment of magic;
And for raising a posthumous shade
With effects that are comic or tragic,
There's no cheaper house in the trade.
Love philter—we've quan—

Why, what is it, Harold? You appear agitated."

"Belphebe!" gasped Shea. "You've got to get me out of here to look for her!" He poured out Roger's story.

Chalmers frowned. "I fail to see the necessity for your immediate departure," he said. "The young woman—if it really is Belphebe—impressed me as being admirably fitted to uh take care of herself. And it

would be most inopportune from my point of view. I'm confronted with a serious problem—"

"Oh, Votsy can stay here—" interrupted Shea.

"Vaclav Polacek is a bright young man, but inclined to irresponsibility," continued Chalmers firmly. "Also, he has a uh deplorable weakness for spirituous liquors, not to mention the fair sex. You are the only person on whom I feel I can rely."

Shea grinned ruefully. "O. K.," he said. "You knew you could get me with that argument. But you'll have to help me with my own problem when the time comes."

"I infer that you mean the young woman's engagement to that young man in Faerie? Timias, I believe his name was. I met him once. He impressed me as lacking strength of character. I shall be glad to help as far as I can, Harold, when we have humanized Florimel."

Shea's black eyes sparkled wickedly. Knowing how mulish Chalmers could get, he didn't argue further. But, he suspected it would soon transpire that he could best assist the transformation of Florimel by taking a little trip away from Castle Carena.

IV.

HAROLD SHEA dreamed he was drowning in an ocean of olive oil. It was hard to swim in the stuff. Every time he reached toward the end of an overhanging cliff to pull himself out, a gigantic Roger, with an expression of cruel pleasure on his petulant face, pushed him down with a lance.

He woke to find Vaclav Polacek sitting on the edge of the other bed, holding a handkerchief over his nose. The place reeked of stale olive oil. Shea reeled to the window, which was closed with some alabastine material, and fumbled it open. A blast of cold, fresh air hit him in the face. Beyond the battlements of the castle he could see the snowy crests of a range of mountains, pink in the early sun.

"What the hell!" said Shea. Staying as near the window as possible, he struggled into some of the loose, bright garments that had been provided for him. Outside in the hall, the stench was overpowering. He bumped into Duke Thrasy.

"What makes this stink?" he asked.

"Atlantès forgot to renew his accursed spell, and it ran to its term."

"What spell?"

"Marry, that for holding in bounds the smell of this oil. He must even keep his iron castle oiled, or we should all rust into a heap of rubbish. Quotha, all spells of this sort are but fugitive, and must be reset . . *psst!*"

Atlantès himself came bustling along the corridor. "Good gentlemen! A thousand pardons; nay, a million! I am mortified! Oh, sinful weakness in me!" He began bowing again. "But yet—*sniff*—even now the air grows pure as the breath of a babe. Will you forgive me so far as to join me in breaking fast?"

Shea's appetite, whatever it might normally have been, had vanished under the shock of the olive oil smell. His stomach felt as though it were turning over. But Duke Thrasy answered before he could:

"Ah, good Atlantès, trouble not yourself on so small a matter." He gestured lightly, dismissing the subject to the air. "I mind me, 'tis not so bad as the day Roger slew two thousand serfs at the gate of Pampelona. He is so hasty, and in his war eagerness, forgot that he had left none to rid us of the corpses. I warrant me, we breakfasted in the perfumes of Cathay till Atlantès here came to rescue us with a spell."

The breakfast was mostly meat and a sour, whitish liquid Shea took to be milk. Roger, reclining on cushions across the floor from the psychologists, gobbled horribly. He finished his meal by sucking the left-overs noisily from between his teeth. He stood up.

"Who's for a slash at the pells?" he demanded.

"What's pells?" whispered Polacek.

Shea said behind his hand: "Things you practice on with a sword. Don't shove your ignorance around any more than you have to, Vòtsy. Doc's been giving us a build-up, and we have to live up to it."

THE PELLS of the Castle of Carena were a couple of thick wooden posts in the courtyard. Out beyond them, a couple of men in castle guards' livery were shooting at targets with short, double-curved bows. Oddly enough, they had the heads of baboons.

As the two entered the courtyard, Lord Mosco, a Saracen so pudgy his walk was a waddle, was facing one of the posts with a scimitar in his right fist and a round shield on the other arm. He gave a blood-curdling whoop, leaped at the post light as a cat, and swung. Chips flew. Mosco did a sort of dance around the unoffending wood, slashing forehand and backhand, yelling at the top of his voice, "God is great! There is no God but God! Mahound! Mahound!" He stopped suddenly and walked back, looking pleased with himself. "My Lord Margéan, the pleasure of your word on my performance!"

"I rate it but indifferent good," said Margéan. "Twice you exposed your left side on the recovery, and the war cry did not ring. The enemy is always worse with a good shout in his ears."

Mosco sighed. "Ah, were I but twenty years younger and twenty pounds lighter— But let us see what the outland knights can do. Hola, squire, you with the funny name—"

"Better say you have a sprained wrist," Shea muttered.

But Polacek had his own ideas. "I'll get along. I've been watching him, haven't I? It's not complicated. Can anybody lend me a sticker?"

Duke Thrasy wordlessly handed over his own battered and dented scimitar. Polacek marched up to the pell, yelled, "Rah, rah, rah, Harvard!" and swung up a slash. He misjudged the height of the pell, missed it completely, and swung himself clear round the circle; tripped over his own feet and

had to clutch the post to save himself from falling. "That's my special attack," he explained. "I make believe I'm going to chop him, but instead, I jump into a clinch and wrassle him down where I can really get at him."

Nobody seemed to find the misadventure or the explanation at all funny. The lords looked away, all but one whose glance indicated that Shea was to go next. He pulled out the scimitar he had brought from Xanadu. Lord Mosco looked at him not too unkindly. "My boy, you would not use a proper blade like that for pell work, would you?"

"There's something in that," admitted Shea. "Has anybody got a straight sword I could borrow?"

Somebody in the group handed one up. Shea hefted it. The blade was straight enough, but it was as purely designed for cutting as the scimitars. It had no point whatever, only a rounded end. Too heavy for a proper parry, but it ought to do for a little lunging practice. Shea addressed himself to the post, did a simple disengage lunge, a disengage lunge with an advance, a lunge-and-remise. At the end of five minutes, he had worked up a healthy sweat. He was pleased to hear a murmur of puzzlement and appreciation from the spectators.

Only Roger looked contemptuous. He strode up to the nearest pell, gave a yell that filled the castle yard, and swung an enormous scimitar. *Chunk!* went the blade into the wood, and then quickly *chunk-chunk-chunk-chunk!* With the last blow, the upper half of the pell flew off, turning end over end. He turned and grinned at Shea, rather nastily.

Shea gulped. "Nice work, Roger," he said.

Roger yawned. "'Twill do, for want of a better antagonist. Not that you would be such, outlander. You do but dance and foin with your blade. Give me an honest fighter."

While Shea and Polacek were giving themselves sketchy baths by standing in their wash bowls and emptying the ewers of water over their heads, the latter asked: "What's the program for the rest of the day?"

"Loafing this afternoon, I suppose, and Atlantès' floor show in the evening. He's a good magician all right, and may put on something special."

"Loafing all afternoon? I should think these guys would get too bored to live."

"Roger does. He wants to bash somebody. But you don't know how much loafing a real gentleman is capable of. That doesn't include you, of course. If you're going to get by around here, Votsy, you better get Doc to show you some magic. Ouch! Damn it, my right shoulder's going to be stiff as a board from slugging that overgrown poker around."

"Now," said Reed Chalmers, "that we have covered the elementary principles of similarity and contagion, we shall proceed to the more practical applications of magic. First, the composition of spells. The normal spell consists of two elements, which may be termed the verbal and the somatic. In

the verbal section the consideration is whether the spell is to be based on command of the materials at hand, or upon invocation of higher authority.

"Prosody is of the utmost importance if the first is the case. The verse should conform to the poetic conventions of the environment, to which the materials in question have become sensitive—one might say allergic—as a result of long practice. For instance . uh . in Asgard the verse, for maximum effectiveness, should be alliterative, whereas in Faerie it should be metrical and rhyming. In a world of Japanese mythology, the verse should comprise a fixed number of syllables in a certain—"

"But wouldn't any verse we made for the purpose naturally have the proper form?" asked Shea.

"It is possible. But you interrupt. What I was about to say was that a certain uh . minimum skill in versification is inseparable from the best results. That is why you, Harold, who have what may be called the literary or inspirational type of mind, often attain quite remarkable results—"

"The worst of this joint is that they're prohibitionists." said Polacek. "You can't get a—"

"Vaclav!" said Chalmers sharply. Polacek subsided. Chalmers went on: "Magic will thus always remain, I fear, to a large extent an art. But there is also the somatic element of the spell, subject to more precise regulation. The 'mystic passes' are of definite and fixed significance, with a rich language of their own. The nearest comparison that comes to mind is the sign language of the Amerindians—"

Shea's mind wandered as Chalmers droned on. It was old stuff; they had worked it out in Faerie, where Belphebe—Belphebe! She *must* be the same as this Belphégor. With the springy step and the freckles under her tan—

He was jerked out of his daydream by an eruption from Polacek. The Rubber Czech was on his feet, exclaiming: "Sure, I understand, Doc. Let's take time out for some lab work. Watch that cushion while I put a spell on it."

"No!" shouted Shea and Chalmers together.

"Aw, please. *Can't* you ever believe a guy can learn anything?"

"I remember," said Shea, "when you blew up the lab and almost killed yourself in sophomore chem, trying to make cacodyl. That was eight years ago, and you haven't changed much. You stick around for some more lectures before you try any experiments."

"Yeah, I know, but—"

The argument was squelched by the arrival of Florimel from her siesta. But so was the lecture on magic. Shea wandered off.

It was clear and bright on the battlements, with an autumnal vigor in the air. Around a sheltered corner Shea came on Atlantès reading a scroll. The little enchanter climbed out of his deck-chair arrangement and bowed.

"Hail, Sir Harold!" He shook his finger playfully. "Ah, you Christians,

you Christ[illegible] With your knighthoods and barons and orders. No wonder we are alw[illegible]eaten. At the next Divan, I shall present to King Agramant a method—but how I run on, against the laws of courtesy. You are comfortable, I hope, despite the inconveniences of this crude abode?"

Shea was comfortable. Shea said so. The entertainment last evening he had been unable fully to appreciate. "Is there anything so incomparably good for tonight, My Lord of Carena?"

Atlantès snapped his fingers and shrugged. "I fear you will find it inconsiderable. Merely seven virgins of Sericane; singers and dancers. They were sold me by a dealer who swears they are sisters of a single birth."

He was watching out of one corner of his eye, and Shea took this as a cue for excitement. "Incredible!" he said. "I can hardly live till evening! But"—he let his voice fall—"your nephew, Roger. He seems restless. Will he like it as well as I?"

"Ah, Sir Harold! To you, as a fellow member of the profession, I can speak freely. He is restless; fain would shatter skulls, holding that the proper business of a paladin. Nor can I altogether gratify him by letting him deal death to my invited guests." Atlantès' laugh was thin and rather piercing. "Marry, I'd soon have no guests. So, for his amusement I must even count on peaceful means, or such chance strangers as have the boldness or skill to meet him with weapons. I have not seen him so interested for months as this dawning, when you went through your exercises. Doubtless you have a spell to preserve you from death by arms?"

It occurred to Shea that he had never in his life been more politely invited to let himself be killed. But he said: "Why are you so anxious to keep him here? I'd think it would be good for him to get away occasionally."

Atlantès pointed. "You see these mountains, Sir Harold? When I had your fire of youth, many an hour I spent among them, climbing crags after ibex. Should you care for the sport, 'twill pleasure me to bid our hunter take you abroad among yon peaks."

"That would be fine," replied Shea gravely, making a mental note that his question about Roger remained unanswered. "But at present I'm more interested in Florimel and Doc—that is, Sir Reed's project for her. How is that coming along, by the way?"

"Ah, miserable me, that I have not ere this been of more avail to your poor friend! Yet, 'tis not beyond hope. Daily I experiment by methods of my own devising."

"Maybe I could help a little," said Shea. "I know a fair amount of magic."

"Of that I have no doubt. Indeed, magical sir, it were wondrous if you were not far advanced beyond my own poor powers—or comprehension. Yet, you know full well how one head in this affair is even better than twain. Should the day come, fear not; I shall not fail to seek your potent aid."

"Beg pardon. But if you'll give me a hint of what lines you're working on, we might check results against each other."

"Oh, sir!" Atlantès looked horrified. "Know you not that were we to invoke the same afreets and devils—yet, nay, how could you, being of race alien to this form of the art. And now a thousand pardons, but I must leave you." He rose and started toward the stairs, the motions of his feet beneath the long robe giving him an odd resemblance to a centipede. He turned back.

"Ten thousand pardons, magical sir. 'Twas rank discourteous of me not to say it erstwhile, yet I would have you know that these mountains are very pillars of mischance, and if you would venture abroad—it had best be with me or one of mine."

SHEA WALKED the battlements after he had left, gazing at the frosty mountains. Belphégor—Belphebe—the thought still haunted him. Was she out there, somewhere? And for that matter, more practically, was Atlantès' farewell a veiled threat, an indication that they were prisoners in the Castle of Iron? He resented the idea and he would have set about getting out forthwith but for his promise to help Chalmers. It seemed fairly clear that Atlantès was stalling Doc all right, but—

His meditations were interrupted by one of Atlantès' serving men. This one had the overgrown head and long bill of some kind of bird. The creature plucked his sleeve.

"What's the trouble?" asked Shea.

Though it seemed to understand, the only sound it made was a kind of whistling bark. It pulled at his arm insistently, until he followed. It led him down the stairs to a corridor, patted his shoulder, and left him face to face with Polacek.

"Hello," said the latter cheerfully. He was bursting with a secret. "Say, I got hold of one of those hobgoblins, and he'll find the stuff all right. But I can't find her!"

"What stuff? Who?"

"That little darb that did the dance last night. And what kind of stuff did you think? Something to drink, of course."

"You get around, don't you? Lead on to the liquor; but you're out of luck on the girl friend. Atlantès probably fetched her here by magic for the show and sent her back home the same way."

"For the love of Mike! I never thought of that." The Rubber Czech's face took on an expression of intense interest. "Say, do you s'pose Atlantès would show *me* how to work a spell like that?"

He was leading the way down a circular staircase in one of the towers of the castle. The goblin, a purple-skinned being with an enormous head and spindly little legs, was at his job of dishwashing. In one corner of the kitchen a large, gaunt hound lay with a dish between its forepaws. The goblin held up a plate, repeated a formula and emitted a whistle. Instantly the dog replied by licking the empty plate before him. As it did so, the detritus disappeared from the plate held by the goblin.

"Guk!" said Polacek. "What price dinner?"

Shea grinned. "Don't be squeamish. That's a perfectly sanitary proceeding. The stuff gets from the outside of the plate to the inside of the dog without touching a thing."

The goblin waddled over to them with a crablike gait. "Got it, Odoro?" asked Polacek, and winked.

"Can get," said Odoro. "You go wait."

They went to Chalmers' laboratory first. There was a rustling within at their knock. When they entered, Chalmers and Florimel were a good twenty feet apart, looking hangdog. Polacek asked Chalmers for some local money, which the doctor tendered with an almost suspicious haste.

As they went to their own room, Polacek snickered: "To look at Daddy Chalmers, you'd think it was a crime to hold a girl in your lap."

"He probably never has before," replied Shea.

THE GOBLIN was there almost at once. He had a small leather bottle wrapped in a dishcloth, tucked furtively under one arm.

Polacek paid him. He turned to go. Shea said: "Just a minute, Odoro." He had captured both the bottle and his Xanadu scimitar. "Your master is pretty tough about liquor, isn't he?"

"Oh, yes, awful. Prophet's law."

"What would happen if he found out you'd been selling it to his guests?"

The goblin shuddered. "Anathema, second-class." His grin vanished. "You not tell, no?"

"We'll see."

The goblin paled to lavender, hopping from foot to foot. "Oh, you not do that! I do you boon! That no way to do to me! That not knightly!" he squeaked. "Here, you not want wine, you give me back."

He danced up to Shea and grabbed at the bottle. Shea whisked it out of his reach and lifted the scimitar. "Easy, easy," he said. "This is evidence. All I want is a little information, and you don't have to worry about our telling."

"I not know nothing," grumbled Odoro. His eyes ran round and round the room.

"No? Votsy, you go find Atlantès while I keep an eye on— Oh, you don't want him to go? Maybe you'd rather talk? I thought you would. Well, what's Atlantès keeping Roger in the castle for?"

"Afraid he join infidels. Somebody prophecy, Roger he get to infidels, they convert him. He fight true believers."

"Now isn't that nice. How does Atlantès keep him here? Magic, or just those evening entertainments?"

"Not know. Swear beard of Prophet, not know. Think Atlantès do something with mind—you know"—Odoro pointed at his head—"drive mind like horse. Only Roger not have much mind. He hard—to to drive."

Shea smiled. "That's about what I thought. Give him another nickel,

Votsy. Now, what's Atlantès' idea in keeping Sir Reed here? Can he really do anything for Florimel?"

"Not know. Atlantès, he very great magician. But I not know."

"O. K. Votsy, will you go get—"

"Not know! Not know! I ignorant!" wailed Odoro.

"Maybe he really doesn't." suggested Polacek.

"Maybe. And maybe he gets a break for that crack about Roger. Run along, Odoro. You say nothing, we'll say nothing."

"Whew!" said Polacek, when the goblin had gone. "You've got nerve, Harold. I think that deserves a drink."

Shea got down a couple of pewter cups, uncorked the bottle, sniffed, and poured out some for each. It was a dark, sweet wine, nearly black, with something the flavor of port. Shea sipped his, remarking with the air of an old conspirator: "You don't want to start asking questions right and left among the help. They may lie to you, and they may be souped up to report anything you ask to the boss. You have to get a hold on them."

Polacek held out his cup for another drink, but Shea firmly corked the bottle, explaining: "We've got to hang onto some of this to keep Odoro in line. Besides, Atlantès would smell more on your breath a mile away, and know something wasn't kosher."

V.

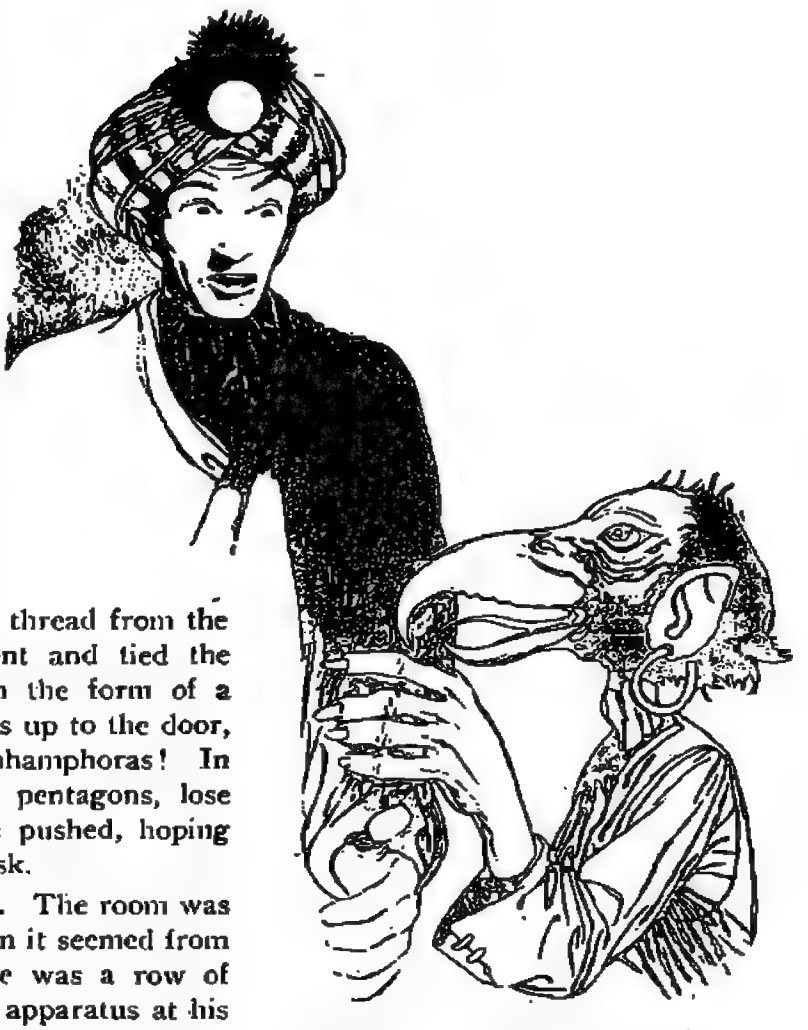
IT WAS evident that Roger was not enjoying the party, though the seven virgins of Sericane were concentrating their attention on him. Harold Shea told himself he might have enjoyed it if he had a comfortable place to sit, something to smoke, or something to drink. Reed Chalmers was enjoying nothing but the company of Florimel.

The dance went on. Finally, the perfect paladin stood up, yawning openly. "By the tombs of Mersemma! Uncle, this is the least good of your entertainments. Who's for a hunt by moonlight with me?"

Atlantès stopped talking to Chalmers and fluttered his hands. Shea thought he was going through the passes of what might be either a magic or a hypnotic formula. Polacek stood up. He called to Roger, "Say, I got an idea!" and drew him around the corner of the hall entrance. Nobody seemed to mind their loss very much but the seven girls. Even Atlantès took up his conversation with Chalmers again. But Shea felt uneasy; Polacek had too great a capacity for trouble to suit him. He got up and strolled out into the corridor.

No sign of Roger and his friend. He ambled along the corridor and turned into another. He was about to climb the stairs to his own room when he noticed, at the turn of the staircase, a door marked with the interlocked pentagons that are the protection of magicians who deal with devils. Atlantès' laboratory!

Shea's attention changed. He stepped rapidly up to his own room. Without looking for Polacek, he belted his scimitar on, then returned to the.



pentagoned door. There was no handle, and when he pushed, it did not open. But he knew enough about magic by this time to find the answer for a spell like that. Reaching to his turban, he plucked from the brush that adorned its front a couple of stiff bristles, detached a thread from the hem of his garment and tied the bristles together in the form of a cross. He held this up to the door, whispered, "Schemhamphoras! In the name of God, pentagons, lose your power!" He pushed, hoping there was no basilisk.

There was not. The room was long, and lower than it seemed from the outside. There was a row of alembics and other apparatus at his right, faintly visible in the blue-white, phosphorescent light thrown from the eyes of an owl and a crocodile which stood on a pair of shelves. The animals were quite immobile; evidently Atlantès' private system of artificial lighting. Along the shelf beneath them was a row of textbooks and handbooks, terminating in little compartments that held scrolls, each with its title on an attached tag.

The latter were likely to be the more useful. Shea glanced at them: "Ye Principles of Magick with Ye Conjuration of Daemons Superadded;" "Poisons Naturall;" "One Thousand Useful Curses;" "Ye Design & Operation of Magick Carpets;" "Ye Handbook of Thaumaturgie;" "Mallamy's Owne Theorie of Illusions and Ye Practice of Gramarie;" "Al Q'asib's Manner of Magickal Transformation."

That might have something. Shea pulled the scroll out and glanced at it in the eye-light of the animals. It seemed to have a good deal of general theory, but little of nothing about practical details. When he hurried along

to the index at the end of the scroll, that likewise was a disappointment. There was nothing about snow maidens.

Shea slipped the scroll back in place and turned to find Atlantès' notebooks. If the enchanter had really worked on the question, there ought to be something there. The big, scarred oak table at the end of the room was bare. Atlantès was a neat sorcerer. Notebooks, notebooks, where would they be? A basket chair stood behind the table and behind that again a built-in cabinet. Bending close, Shea noted that, like the door to the room, it was marked with interlocking pentagons. That would be it. He felt in his pocket for the cross of brush, produced it, and was about to bid the cabinet open, when his ear caught the faint sound of a voice bidding the outer door to open.

IN A FLASH, Shea was on hands and knees behind the big table, which fortunately had a decoration of carved wood screen reaching nearly to the floor.

The door opened. He could not see through the screening. But the light from the corridor outlined the shadow of a baboon's head against the wall. The newcomer was one of Atlantès' servants.

It stood in the doorway a moment, hesitant, as Shea himself had done. Then, with the door swinging to behind it, it stepped confidently toward the bookshelves. Then it fell quiet—too quiet. Shea heard it sniff; sniff again, like the puffing of a toy engine. Of course, it would have a keener sense of smell than a normal human being. The servant went past on the other side of the table, just audible as its feet pressed the carpet. Shea could imagine the snouted head turning this way, that way— He gripped the hilt of his scimitar.

The baboon-head reached the end of the table, *sniff, puff, sniff, puff,* as loud as a locomotive in the oppressive silence.

Then hell broke loose in the castle. A chorus of shouts and bangings echoed through the corridors. The baboon-head darted to the door and out. Shea forced himself to count seven, then scrambled up and followed. The baboon-head was far down the corridor as he emerged, not looking back.

Shea followed. The noise was in the direction of the entertainment hall. Shea headed that direction. He went down the first half of the big, winding stairway, two steps at a time. From where it spread to a landing he saw Atlantès and his guests coming up, with swords, chairs, and every other sort of weapon, chasing a wolf the size of a heifer. It came straight toward Shea, but with its tail between its legs and looking thoroughly miserable.

Shea tried to get out his scimitar, but it jammed in the new sheath. The animal was upon him. He braced himself, tugging at the hilt. But the wolf, instead of trying to bite him, threw itself on the landing and rolled over. It waved its paws in the air, emitting an unwolflike: "Wah-wah, wah-wah!" It rolled back again, and still prone, licked his shoes.

"Hey, wait a minute," said Shea to the crowding pursuers. "This is a rummy kind of wolf. What do you make of it, Atlantès?"

The sorcerer stepped forward. "Certes, 'tis a most unforeseen rare creature. A thousand pardons, Sir Harold, will you grant me room?" He squatted down and peered into the animal's eyes. "As I thought! A werewolf! Ten thousand furies, how came such a sending to Carena? Duke Astolph's work, I'll be bound!" He looked around the circle. "Has anyone a silver weapon to dispatch this brute?"

Nobody had, apparently. "Knock it on the head with a club," advised one of the lords. The wolf set up a piteous howling and rolled over and over.

"As well speak of battering Tarek's rock with a child's sling. The beasts are enchanted."

CHALMERS had come up with the hunt, breathless. Now he interposed. "Ahem—wouldn't it be the part of uh ; wisdom to disenchant the animal? As I understand the matter, he would then lose any previous invulnerability."

Atlantès bowed. "Ah, that we have not the pleasure of your company always, Sir Reed! You speak great sooth. Let me con the matter—how goes the spell against werewolves?"

"If we had some holy water, it would be easy, but I can try," replied Chalmers. "Come—

"Wolf, wolf, wolf of the windy mountain,
Wolf of fear;
I conjure you by the wine-dark fountain,
Disappear!"

His fingers moved rapidly. The wolf shuddered and turned into Vaclav Polacek, clothes and all.

"Good heavens!" he ejaculated. "Might as well shoot a man as scare him to death. Why didn't you lay off after I told you who I was?"

"You didn't tell us," said Shea.

"I did so. I said, 'For the love of Mike, Harold, it's me, Votsy,' clear as anything."

"Maybe it would have sounded like that to another wolf, but it didn't to us," replied Shea. "How did you get into that mess, anyway?" There was a chorus of agreement to the question.

"Well," said Polacek. He cleared his throat twice before he could get going. "It's like this. Roger and me, we're pals, just like this." He held up two fingers close together. "He wanted to get a week end off, and he said he'd show me a good time. So . uh I figured I knew enough magic to change shapes with him. And I wanted some magical experience. So I worked a little spell, but it turned me into a wolf instead. I'm sorry I made so much trouble."

"Must be your Slavonic ancestry," remarked Shea. "The Czechs are always full of werewolf stories, and—"

He was halted by seeing Atlantès bristle. "S-so!" said the enchanter.

"Noble youth, were I not restrained by my obligations knightly and of host—Where is my dear nephew and noble prince, by the way?" He looked around. Everybody looked around. But there was no sign of Roger.

Atlantès screamed an order to search the castle. When the search was done there was still no Roger. He paced the floor of the entertainment hall, with two bright-red spots on his cheeks, pulling at his beard, and muttering curses. When the last of the beast-headed servants came back with a negative report, the sorcerer turned on Polacek.

"You witless fool!" he screamed. "You meddling faitour! Were you other than you are, I'd have you scourged, you illegitimate offspring of the unblessed union of the runt from a litter of mongrels and a saddle-backed sow!" He turned from the contritely silent Polacek to Chalmers: "This is your fault, bungling apprentice that you are, lying knave! You—"

"Hey!" said Shea, taking Atlantès by the arm. "That's a fighting word where we come from. If you want real trouble—"

"Harold!" said Chalmers, "let me handle this. We don't want—"

Shea said: "I still won't let him get away with—"

Chalmers said: "Never mind, Harold. I'll uh defend myself to any extent necessary."

Atlantès glowered. " 'Twas your fault, first and last, for bringing hither that miscegenated idiot. Oh, finger not your sword, Sir Harold; I'm of power enough in my own castle to turn you to a beetle-grub. Your fault, and therefore hear my judgment: you shall repair the damage you have wrought, and I shall take fitting measure to see you accomplish this." He extended his arms, closed his eyes, and cried in a high voice:

"Beshem hormots vahariman tesovev ha-esh, asher anena esh, el metzudat habsitel!"

There was a *whoosh* and a buzz, like an electric fan in the next room. Atlantès' permanent smile came back, and he bowed low.

"Gentles," he said, "if you will but look without, you will see beyond the walls of this poor hovel a circle of flame. I need not say that 'tis sure death to all who try to pass it, whether they be human wights or simulacers and illusions. Let but that Lady Florimel of yours attempt it; she'll be but snow or a mere drop of spittle in a second. I hold you then hostages; till my Roger returns, the flame remains. Fetch him by what spells you will, sobeit he comes back unharmed. And now, fair sirs, a thousand pardons, but I have affairs and must leave you to contemplate your crime and devise a remedy."

He turned his back. Chalmers began to dither. "I uh I'm not sure I'm far enough advanced in the science of apportation, as distinguished from that of inter-universal travel—"

"S-st!" said Shea. "If magic doesn't work, I'll take a running broad jump through this flame and go hunt Roger myself. I don't mind getting my eyebrows singed off."

Atlantès turned back. "What's that?" he said sharply. " 'Twould take

more than your eyebrows, Sir Harold. Yet I would not have so valiant a cavalier incinerated, especially when his success in his quest is my gain. So, I'll pass you through the flame unharmed."

"I'd like to go, too," said Polacek. His expression showed that he did not anticipate a pleasant time at the castle after the wolf episode.

Atlantès agreed and departed. Shea found Chalmers looking at him keenly. The doctor said: "I wonder, Harold, if helping Florimel was your sole motive in offering to go?"

Shea grinned. "It's the only one you need know about, Doc."

VI.

THE WHOLE castle turned out to see Shea and Polacek off on their Roger-hunt the following morning. On the evening before, Chalmers had tried to establish thought-contact with the peerless chevalier as a preliminary to recalling him by magical means. But he gave it up with the remark that Roger had as few thoughts as anyone above the level of imbecile could.

The job, accordingly, devolved on Shea and Polacek. Atlantès was at the gate to bow them out with utmost courtesy. Shea could feel the heat of the wall of fire against his face. Atlantès dipped his finger in a small bottle of oil, and drew an isosceles triangle on Shea's forehead, and a right triangle over the first, muttering a small spell as he did so. He repeated the process with Polacek, and with the chief huntsman of the castle, a broad-shouldered, swarthy man named Echegaray.

This Echegaray strode with them with a crossbow over his shoulder. He stopped when he reached the magic barrier. The flames streaking soundlessly far over their heads, looked uncommonly real and terrifying, though the grass at their feet seemed unharmed. Shea felt like stopping, too, but with the whole castle looking on—he threw out his chest and marched straight through. Two steps did it, and the fire only tingled.

The others did not appear for a moment. Then there was a half-choked yell and Echegaray came through, dragging Polacek after him. The hunter looked at Shea, spat, and jerked his thumb toward Polacek, who was swelling with futile indignation. "Tried to change his mind," remarked Echegaray. "This way."

The road was no more than a track down the mountain on which the castle stood. They were already below the timberline, constantly ducking under the branches of tall trees beside their path. A cool mountain breeze was up; it hissed through the pine needles and bent the short plumes in the turbans Shea and Polacek wore. Their outfits were less elaborate than those they had worn in the castle. Polacek had been supplied with a wicked, curved dagger, while Shea still had the Xanadu scimitar. He distrusted the weapon; it was useless for thrusting and awkward on the parry, altogether better suited to a slashing fanatic than a methodical épée fencer.

Three hours brought them to the foot of the main peak. There the path

began climbing and dipping across a series of spurs. The forest grew thicker. Echegaray led them into the throat of a valley, where a stream dropped past in a series of waterfalls and the ten a. m. sun failed to touch the bottom. The gorge widened to a valley which held a patch of swamp, through which they squished past the edge of a pond. Shea started and Polacek came to a stand at a glimpse of white skin and gauzy wings as the water-fays, or whatever they were, ducked out of sight. Echegaray pressed on without looking back.

Beyond, the valley narrowed again. The stream slipped in so close to the mountain wall on their side that it had to be crossed. The bridge was a single log, over which Echegaray strode nonchalantly. Shea followed with difficulty, waving his arms for balance. Polacek stuck his thumbs in his sash and tried to make it unperturbed, but slipped and fell in. The water was only ankle deep, but he got a nasty crack on the shin.

"Time to eat," said the hunter as Polacek scrambled out, cursing with a verve that should have curled the leaves. Echegaray sat down abruptly and took out of his pack a loaf of bread and a slab of dried meat, each of which he divided into three fair portions.

"Know whither you're bound?" he said a moment later, as they munched away.

"No," said Polacek. Shea pulled out a piece of paper on which he had drawn a sketch map. "I got Atlantès to give me the layout of the country," he said.

"Magic?" asked Echegaray, pointing to the map.

"No. Just a map."

"What?"

"A map. You know, like a picture of the country with the roads and towns."

"Magic," said Echegaray flatly.

"O. K. It's magic then. If you could show us where we are on the map—"

"We aren't," said Echegaray.

"What do you mean we aren't? We can't have walked far enough to get off the map."

"Never on the map. We're on a log."

Shea sighed. "All I want is for you to show me the spot on my map corresponding to the place where we are now."

Echegaray shook his head. "Don't understand magic."

"Oh, to hell with the magic. Look at this thing. Here's Castle Carena."

"Don't believe it. Castle's a long way from here."

"No, no. This place on the map means Castle Carena. Now we want to know where we are, on the map."

Echegaray pushed back his hat and scratched his short black hair. Then his brows cleared. "Want us on the map?"

"Yes. You're getting the idea."

The hunter took the map from Shea's hand, laid it on the ground, smoothed it out, stood up—

"Hey!" yelped Shea. He caught Echegaray's shoulders and pushed him back, just as the hunter's boot was descending onto the paper. "What's the idea of stepping on my map?"

Echegaray sat down. "Said you wanted us on the map. Magic carpet, no?"

"I didn't mean you were to be on the map physically."

"Why'n't you say so? First you want me on the map. Then you don't. Can't make up your minds. Never saw such people."

Shea folded the map and put it back in his sash. "Let's forget it. Polacek's to go south to look for Roger, and I'm bound north. Which way do we go?"

"Oh," said Echegaray. "That's easy. Road forks a mile down. He goes left. First village, four miles. You go right. First village, twelve miles. I'll go with you if you keep quiet."

The hunter finished his food, broke off a twig, and whittled a toothpick. He used it with relish, pausing now and then to belch.

"Ready?" he said presently. Shea and Polacek nodded. Echegaray got up, adjusted his pack, picked up his crossbow, and swung off.

THE STREAM hung with them past another waterfall. Shea couldn't help thinking how Belphebe would like such country.

The fork was upon them quickly. Shea shook hands with Polacek, saying: "Good luck, Votsy. Better buy yourself a real sword when you get the chance. And don't forget to start back in fifteen days or less, whether you find him or not."

"Don't worry about me," answered Polacek blithely. "I figure I know how to get along with these yaps. So long."

Shea held on after the hunter. He was thankful that his colleague had only four miles to go to human habitation. Polacek's short legs were not hardened like Shea's, and as he toddled off down the road, he was already looking a bit weary.

The path slanted down into a series of buck-jumps, and the trees began to crowd them from both sides. At the bottom it turned upward, equally steep. Though Shea was puffing, Echegaray kept on like a machine. As they reached a glade that promised easier going, Shea said: "Mind resting a minute?"

"All right." The hunter leaned against a tree, sucking at his toothpick. Shea leaned against another, breathing deeply.

Twunk! Twunk! The tree jarred under the blows. Shea jumped—or tried to. He found he couldn't. A long, white-shafted arrow had pinned his right coat sleeve to the tree, and another the right leg of his baggy pants. He caught a glimpse of Echegaray's astonished brown face as the hunter flung himself flat.

Echegaray snaked forward to the shelter of a fallen trunk, the crossbow at his side. He whipped a curved iron thing from his boot and slipped an eye in one end of it over a stud on the side of the bow. He pulled the other end back, cocking the bow.

There were no more arrows. Echegaray peered around cautiously. He whipped a crossbow bolt out of his bandoleer and slipped it into the groove, then stuck three more in the ground beside him.

"Jerk loose. Drop!" he snapped in a stage whisper.

"Can't," said Shea. He was trying to get one of the arrows out with his left hand. But the position was awkward, and the shaft tough and deeply embedded. The suit was of a heavy, tweedy wool that did not tear. Echegaray was watching the woods with bright-eyed attention. Shea started to wriggle out of his coat. Something moved, about eighty yards away.

Snap! The bolt flashed among the trees. Somebody laughed, and Echegaray snatched up his cocking lever.

Before he could finish reloading, a voice roared: "Yield thee, sirrah! Halloo, halloo, and a mort!" A large man had jumped from nowhere and stood over the hunter, waving a two-handed, cross-hilted sword. He was beefy and ruddy, with a yellow mustache of the type usually associated with bartenders. Beneath his big round chin was a scarf with diagonal stripes of red, blue and brown. He had on a leather jacket and light steel cap. A kind of horn, like a bugle twice life-size, was strapped to his back.

Echegaray rolled over, fishing out his knife, then thought better of it. He dropped the weapon sullenly.

Down among the trees, where the crossbow bolt had flown, a hat with a feather came into view. It was bobbing on the end of a stick. The stick was held by a girl in a knee-length tunic, a girl with freckles and reddish-gold hair, cut in a long bob. She trotted toward them as if she were going to break into a dance step at any moment. She carried a longbow in her other hand.

"Belphebe!" squawked Harold Shea.

The girl came toward them, frowning, as though trying to remember something. "Bel—that is a word not unfamiliar to me, yet it is not my name. I hight Belphégor."

Shea looked blank. "Don't you remember me? Harold Shea. Busyrane's castle."

"No no yet there is that in your bearing—"

"You haven't got a twin sister named Belphebe, have you?"

"Nay, not I."

"Then you must be Belphebe."

"I say," said Yellow Mustache, "what'll we do with 'em? This chappie here is Atlantès' hunter again, right?"

"Aye, my lord Astolpli. Small news shall we have from him, even though he know it. Remember the last time we caught him. Your bolts,

Master Echegaray." The hunter, muttering something about "damned women who ought to be at the spinning wheel," thrust forward a fishful of bolts.

"So? Have we them all?" The girl pulled the bandoleer toward her and snatched out another bolt. "A clever rogue, is it not?"

Echegaray shrugged. "Worth trying," he said resignedly.

"Very well, my man, you may go," said the man addressed as Astolph. Echegaray picked up his crossbow and silently disappeared among the trees. The man with the sword turned to Shea:

"As to you, my fine Saracen fowl, how's this? D'you know Belphégor?"

"I think I do, honest," said Shea. "But she seems to have forgotten me."

"She's forgotten a thing here and there. Whatever that cad Atlantès did to her, it's muddled up her memory."

"Then she is Belphebe—"

"That's neither here nor there for the present. If you don't want to lose that jolly head of yours, it's up to you to give an account of yourself. Do you have a safe-conduct from the Emperor Charles?"

Shea flared up. "No, I haven't, damn it. Listen here, Dick Turpin, suppose you do some explaining first—"

"Dick Turpin? I say, wasn't he the bandit chap in old England? Haw, haw, that's good! Damned good! But I say, how would you know about him?"

"How would you?"

"We're asking the questions, young fella. Who—. By Jove, don't tell me you're from my own universe? The one that's built around the British Isles?"

"Yep. Only I'd have said the State of Ohio."

"American, as I live! Extrawdinry people, Americans—give me a million dollars or I'll bump you for a loop of houses, eh? Isn't Ohio where the cinema colony is? Hollywood? No, that's in your province of Florida. But what are you doing in that silly Saracen outfit?"

"That's what they gave me at Castle Carena, where I landed." Shea gave a thumbnail account of his apportation.

"I say," said Astolph, "this chap Chalmers, your colleague, must be quite an adept. Do you know my old friend Merlin?"

"You mean the famous one, the Welsh wizard? Is he still around?"

"Certainly. I meet him at the Sphinx Club in London. Do you know him?"

"No."

Astolph's expression went a trifle grim. "That's unfortunate. Really, you know, someone must vouch for you."

"There's Doc Chalmers."

"Another American. Both gangsters, doubtless. That would account for your being with the Saracens. I fancy it would be best to put you out of the way now. I can't let you go, you know, under such circumstances, and

it's impossible to use you as a prisoner for exchange, since there's no war on yet."

"Hey!" said Shea, beginning to perspire at this reasoning. "I'm sure Bel—that is, your girl friend here will remember me if you give her a chance."

"Do you?" Astolph asked the girl.

"I fear not, my lord Astolph. 'Tis a lightsome springald, but as you say, like enough to be a spy."

"I have the high justice," said Astolph, as though that settled everything. "Which shall it be, rope or sword?"

"I'll fight you, damn it, if you'll turn me loose," said Shea desperately.

"Righto," said Astolph amiably. "Just as you like. Ordeal of battle, and sound law, too. Only fair to let a chap go out on his feet. Cover him, Belphégor." He wrapped a large red hand around each of the arrows in turn, and yanked it out.

SHEA shucked out of his coat and drew the scimitar. Astolph balanced his long sword. As soon as Shea came within reach, the duke whipped the big blade up and struck. *Clang! Clang! Clang!* Shea parried with the awkward curved thing, though the force of Astolphe's attack almost drove it from his hand. He took a couple of swipes with it; Astolph parried one easily, and jumped away from the other. At the second he came in again and Shea was forced to give ground.

The duke was good but not too good. Shea felt a mounting confidence he could parry anything the big blade sent at him. The confidence was replaced by a trickle of worry. Astolph's reach and length of blade would keep him too far away for the scimitar to be used properly. In time the big man would wear him down.

Another whirl and he almost lost his sword. The too-small handle was slippery in his grasp. He got angrier and angrier at the unfairness of this big lug.

Astolph drove him back again, almost against a tree, and lowered his blade for a second. The sight of the exposed chest brought Shea's fencing reflexes to the surface. His right arm shot out with his whole body behind it in a long lunge. The point of the scimitar hit jacket and chest with a thump. Astolph, not expecting such a push, sat down.

"Yield thee yourself!" roared Shea, standing over him and sighting on the Englishman's neck.

The duke's left arm came around like a jibing main boom and swept Shea's ankles from beneath him. Down went Shea. He was struggling in a bone-crushing wrestler's grip, when he heard the girl cry: "Duke Astolph! He spake sooth! I remember! Peace, peace, good gentles!" They untangled themselves cautiously. Astolph's nose was bleeding. Shea's hair was in his eyes and one of the eyes was swelling. His turban had come loose and was draped round him like one of Laäcoön's serpents.

Belphebe—or Belphégor—gave Shea a helping hand to his feet, and

turned to Astolph. "This is a very true and gentle knight, I bear witness," she said in her flutelike voice. "Ah, Sir Harold, 'twas that strange thrust of yours, as when you slew the Losel, that roused my memory. You should have done it erst; but I cry your pardon, for when I was rapt here from Faerie, I lost all memory. My lord Astolph, I hope you're not hurt?"

Astolph had opened his jacket. The shirt underneath bore a red spot. "Only a scratch," he said cheerfully. "It's the angle made by the point of a scimitar. Jolly good thing you didn't do that with a straight blade, or I'd have been properly skewered. I daresay you can show me a trick or two. Now let's get matters straightened out. You first, old girl."

THERE WAS a duet of explanation. When it had finished, Astolph turned to Shea: "So you want to take Roger back to Castle Carena, do you? Most unfortunate that we should be rivals, as 'twere. We're after that young un ourselves."

"What for?"

"Convert him to Christianity and get him on our side. Stupid ass, but an awfully good fighter. Got himself in trouble with several of King Agramant's nobles, and as Agramant's going to try another invasion of France soon, we thought it would be a good job. The young lady kindly offered to help."

"What's your side?"

"My dear fellow! The Paladins, of course."

"Who the hell are they?"

"The emperor's companions. You know of Emperor Charles, I daresay?"

"'Fraid not."

"He's the johnny who always gets mixed up with Charlemagne in the legends, et cetera, and a couple of other et ceteras."

Belphebe spoke up: "My lord Astolph, Sir Harold is a powerful and adept magician, oh, a very prince of enchanters. He and this Sir Reed might serve your cause well."

"Indeed?" said Astolph. "Cast us a spell, old bean."

Shea, caught flat-footed, thought for a minute. He could remember only a simple little spell he had seen Chalmers use once, to produce a plant before the eyes. In Doc's case it was a snapdragon. Grass would do to start with; it ought to make some kind of important-looking plant. Shea plucked a handful, laid it on the ground, knelt over it, whispering his spell. Then, closing his eyes, he bent down and blew.

When he opened them again, there was no sign of a plant. Neither was there of the grass. He wondered if he had made a mistake.

Astolph was looking straight at him. "By Jove! That's a neat bit, Sir Harold. Quite as good as I could do myself."

"What is?" asked Shea. His voice sounded oddly muffled to his ears, as though he were speaking through a blanket. Which, as he learned by putting his hand to his face, was what he was doing. His beard was sprout-

ing at about an inch a second. It spread down his chest and out across his shoulders, the ends twisting and curling like the heads of thin and inquisitive worms. It passed his belt line, it engulfed his arms.

He frantically tried to think of a counter-spell. He felt a sensation which must be like that of being in hell when he could remember nothing but Chalmers' dragon spell. Live dragons growing from one's face! Or would it be snakes. The beard was past his knees, to his ankles, touching the ground. Belphebe was regarding him with open mouth.

"Oh, bravo!" said Astolph.

The stuff was piling up on the ground in a little haycock of hair. If it would only lay off for a moment, give him a respite in which to think! Shea wondered desperately how long it would keep going if he didn't find the counter-spell. There was the mill that had ground the ocean full of salt. But that was a legend, he answered himself. But then so was this. He stepped back, almost tripping over a root. If that pulsating hair got him down— But wait, maybe he could get Astolph to stop it. If he claimed Merlin as a friend, the duke ought to know something of magic.

"Had enough?" he shouted over the growing mattress of wool to an Astolph whose head was just visible.

"Thanks, yes."

"All right, let's see you take the spell off."

"Righto." Astolph dropped his sword, made a few expert passes, and the mound of first-rate upholstering material vanished. "You must meet Merlin. Nobody likes a good joke better than old Merlin. But, I say, we're wasting time, aren't we? I rather think we ought to work out a method to rescue your friends from Atlantès and bag Roger in one swoop. Where's Buttercup?" He put his forefingers in his mouth and whistled piercingly.

Something moved in the forest. A hippogriff trotted into view, wings folded neatly back against its flanks, pricking up its ears as it came. It poked at Astolph with its beak. He scratched among the roots of the feathers. "It minds me better than it ever did Atlantès," he said. "Those confounded Saracens don't know how to treat animals."

"What does it eat?" asked Shea, practically. "I don't see how that eagle's head goes with a horse's digestive apparatus."

"Blossoms from some of those African plants, I believe. Buttercup's not a heavy eater. Very well, everybody, all aboard. Bit crowded, what? What's that remark you Americans make when punching cows? Brutal business that, by the by. Oh, yes, yippee. *Yippee!*

VII.

THE HIPPOGRIFF trotted swayingly up a rise. Shea imagined that it would not be very fast on the ground, thanks to the interference between the magnified claws of the forelegs and the hoofs behind. When they reached the granite hogback at the crest, the claws hung securely enough to the rock,

but the hoofs skidded alarmingly. Shea clutched Belphebe and Belphebe Astolph, who did not seem in the least perturbed. The hippogriff spread its wings and blundered along the ridge, flapping furiously. It slipped once more, teetered for an instant over a fifty-foot drop, then leaped into the air and swept smoothly over the treetops.

In the universe he had come from, Shea guessed, the beast would have been unable to get off the ground. But the laws of aërodynamics here were different from those he knew. He itched to get Belphebe aside for a long talk. But with the wind whistling in their ears, he could only hang on and wait.

The hippogriff disliked the combined weight of its passengers. Every time it saw a clearing below, it tried to land. Astolph had to bark at it to keep on course. After the third of these abortive landings, Shea saw a cleared area of some size come into view below. The details picked out as those of a small village, surrounded by a patchwork of planted fields and plowed ground. The hippogriff, its horse end now sweating, swooped downward eagerly. It skimmed the ground in a glide, pulled into a stall, and made a four-point landing that jarred Shea's eyeteeth.

Shea climbed off and reached up a hand to help Belphebe. But she vaulted lightly down before she saw the hand, and left him feeling foolish.

Shea looked toward the cottages, and as he looked, there came from them a chorus of screams. Men and women boiled out of the houses, running for their lives. They were deeply sunburned; and most of them appeared to be wearing nothing but long, ragged, and very dirty shirts. They hardly noticed the hippogriff and its passengers as they went past, driven by panic fear.

After them came two men in clothes not unlike Astolph's. One was brandishing a sword, and the other a rude club which seemed once to have been a table leg. Their speed was not quite equal to that of the villagers, but the man with the table leg overtook a villager who limped along behind the rest and brought the club down on his skull. The man dropped.

"I say!" called Astolph. "What's going on here, you chaps?"

The two men abandoned their pursuit and walked over. They were good-looking, youngish fellows, powerfully built, with strong hands. The taller of the two, the one with the table leg, was breathing hard and grinding his teeth. The other, who had a slightly less ferocious expression, answered: "Greetings, most noble Astolph. And to you, fair Belphégor, hail. Roland was giving this impious rabble something to teach them to mend their manners."

Astolph clucked. "Really, Roland, you should learn to control that temper of yours."

"Base varlets!" snarled Roland. "Would you believe it? I bring in a hart of eight, as dainty a bit of venison as ever you saw. And what d'you suppose? They have no more sense than to serve it up boiled, as though

'twere salt stockfish! By Heaven, I'll beat cookery into their heads yet, though I break every one in the process!" He ground his teeth again and glared around, as though to impress on everyone how dangerous he could be when the principles of cookery were despised. In the process, his eye lighted on Shea. "What's this?" he barked, hefting his club. "Looks like a paynim. A cut off the haunch might pay me for the loss of my venison." He emitted a barking sound that showed this was meant for humor. Shea smiled dutifully.

"It's a chap from England—that is, from a country near England. Count Roland d'Anglante, and the Lord Reinald of Montalban, may I present to you Sir Harold de Shea? He's looking for Roger of Carena, too. Coincidence, what?"

"He's like to have a long chase," said Roland. "The kerns say Roger passed through here at earliest dawn, moving as though Saint Beelzebub were on his track."

"Really!" cried Astolph. "I was watching the road myself. If he got through it's quite as startling as making Beelzebub a saint."

Roland shrugged. "Then buy a candle for Beelzebub—or Lucifer, or whom you please. The fact's indubitable. I was asleep; Reinald had the night watch, but went chasing some wench in the mountains."

"How perfectly stinking!" said Astolph. "What the devil did you do that for, Reinald?"

Reinald grinned. "Whilst fair Belphégor drives me to a distance, a man must take his sport where he can."

THEY WALKED toward the village, passing the man Roland had hit. His skull was obviously caved in. When they reached the single street, Shea spotted two more corpses, one with the face smashed in, and the other cut up.

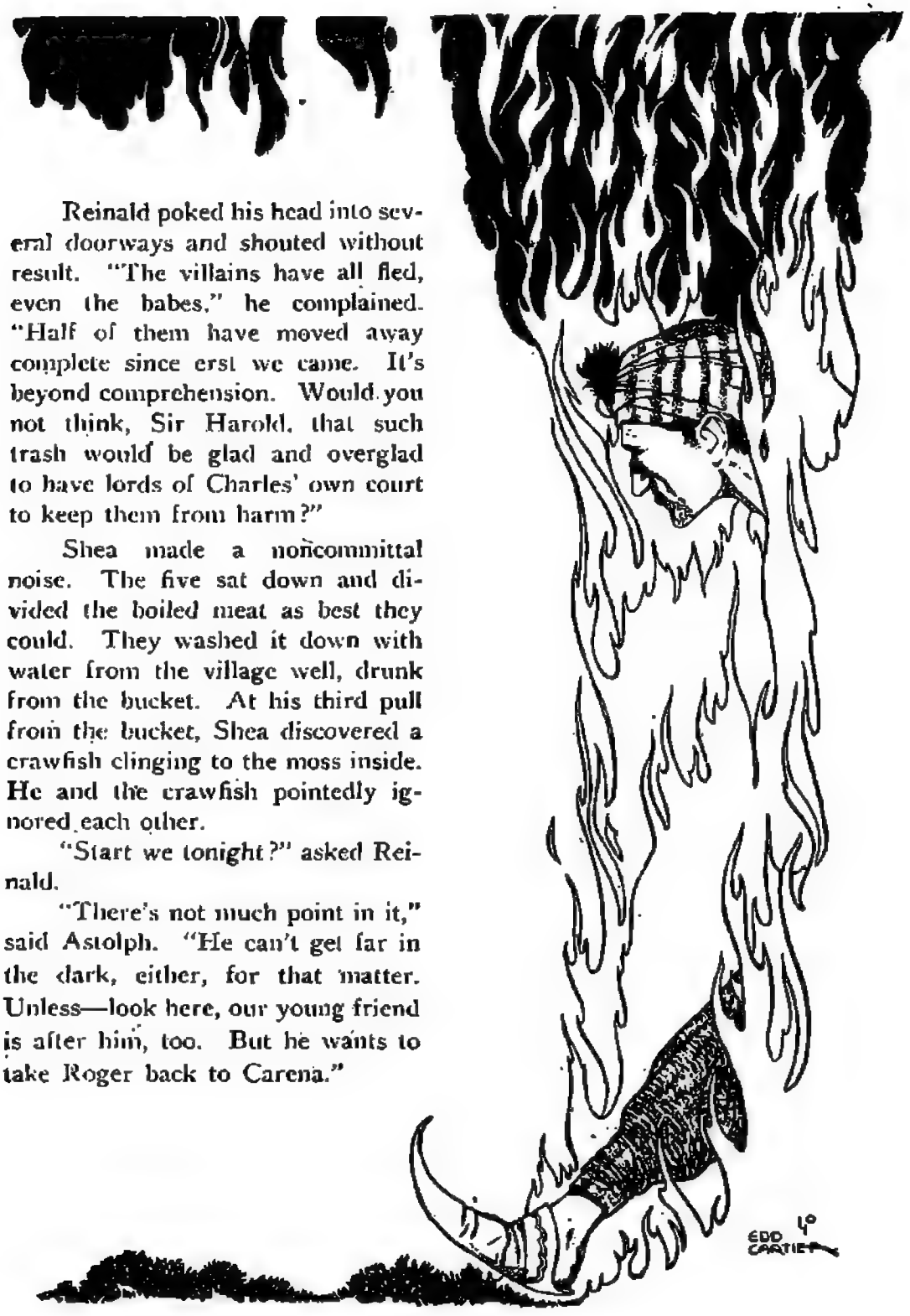
Astolph said: "Do you know, I believe Roger will head west, then back south to join Agramant's army." He turned to Shea and explained. "Your friend with the odd name won't find him. Roger has too simple a mind to think of doubling in that direction. Everyone who really wants to get to Spain in a hurry from Carena has to pass here."

He paused, and pulling the hippogriff's head down to his lips, said something in its ear that sounded like a series of low-toned whistles. The animal cocked an intelligent eye at him and stood still.

The others had walked ahead. Astolph took in the look that Shea gave the corpses. He said apologetically: "Frightful tempers those chaps have. I agree it's too bad about the peasants. But you can't make a world over single-handed, you know. And after all, it's not as though the peasants were upper-class persons."

Shea kept quiet.

A table stood under a tree. On it were two large wooden plates heaped with boiled meat. There were no more plates, and nothing to drink.



Reinald poked his head into several doorways and shouted without result. "The villains have all fled, even the babes," he complained. "Half of them have moved away complete since erst we came. It's beyond comprehension. Would you not think, Sir Harold, that such trash would be glad and overglad to have lords of Charles' own court to keep them from harm?"

Shea made a noncommittal noise. The five sat down and divided the boiled meat as best they could. They washed it down with water from the village well, drunk from the bucket. At his third pull from the bucket, Shea discovered a crawfish clinging to the moss inside. He and the crawfish pointedly ignored each other.

"Start we tonight?" asked Reinald.

"There's not much point in it," said Astolph. "He can't get far in the dark, either, for that matter. Unless—look here, our young friend is after him, too. But he wants to take Roger back to Carena."

"By no means," said Reinald, feeling his sword-hilt.

"That will do, you chaps!" said Astolph sharply. "He's a gentleman. The young lady vouches for him. Besides, he's a fellow countryman of mine, in a way."

Shea, gripping the hilt of his scimitar, said quickly: "You birds claim to be paladins of chivalry, don't you? Well, isn't it the chivalrous thing to give me an equal chance at Roger? It isn't as though I were a Saracen. How about all starting at the same time tomorrow morning."

Roland's face flushed a trifle. "I will not be lectured in knighthood—" he began, but Duke Astolph waved him to silence. "Sounds fair enough to me, Sir Harold," he said. Reinald nodded agreement.

THE boiled meat was gone. Belphebe spoke up: "Wouldst hear the end of the tale of Castle Busyrane, Sir Harold?"

He got up and strolled with her among the line of cottages. Behind him, after a momentary glance, Reinald launched into a gusty account of the previous night's adventure. Astolph supplied an occasional roar of "Haw-haw, damn good!" Roland listened in the gloomy silence of a man who has no story with which to cap the teller of the current tale.

Belphebe said in a low voice: "Mean you in good truth to hold that bargain, Sir Harold? 'Tis your matter, not mine, but I should hold myself less than friend did I not warn you that these paladins have a standard of knightlihood other than that I know."

Shea chuckled. "Think I'm that much of a sap? I could see them figuring how quick they'd leave me behind with their horses and Astolph's hippogriff."

"So I deemed also. Alas, that the chivalry of these lords should lie more in word than in deed!"

"They're the damnedest lugs . . . excuse; Astolph's a pretty good guy, but he's from Chalmers' and my world. How'd you get in with them?"

"I promised Duke Astolph to help abduct Roger, thinking it a way to plague Atlantès whilst waiting for my memory to clear. 'Twas before I met these others, who are even as you say— Why, though they be but paynim sons of Mahound, some Saracens are more courteous by far." A small sigh escaped Belphebe. Shea looked at her sharply.

"You know them?" he asked.

"I've but met one here and there. The young Medoro for example, squire to Lord Dardinell. He was at Castle Carena when Atlantès brought me thither, and left it, I'm told, to search for me. A most sweet boy. Were it not for differences of religion—". She trailed off, blushing a little in the fading light.

Shea winced. "How about your friend Timias?"

"Oh, a murrain, I'm but a weak woman and had forgot! I would keep troth, but across worlds and time? How am I to do? Shall I rest unwedded till he join me here, that is, forever?"

"I wouldn't know," said Shea. "You could marry me."

She laughed. "Come, here's a law clerk's answer—plight troth to two, wed a third, and set the world by the ears to solve the issue! You'd have me a Trojan Helen."

"Well, *would* you? I mean it, honest. Yes, no, or maybe?"

She looked him levelly in the eyes. "I would not willingly hurt you, but since you ask direct, so I'll make answer: No, and no again, though with all good will. Ah, you'll find a better far than I— But, tell me, what think you to do about our friends yonder? They'll to rest any time, since there's no night light in this village."

"Where do they bunk?"

"Bunk? Oh, you would say take their rest. That will be the headman's house, which is the largest, and you with them."

"What about you?" At her startled look he hastily added: "No, don't worry about your safety, kid. I just want to know."

"In the woods as ever. I trust you as much as any wight, Sir Harold, but a maid who lives my free, roving life must be uncommon careful."

"Do you actually like sleeping in the woods?"

"Aye, and why not? 'Tis a thing natural. And I trust these paladins no farther than one can see a mouse through a millstone."

Shea, with effort, fought off the black mood that was settling over him. If he could only catch her between fiancés— But, what the hell? He had a job to do for Chalmers. And if he could get her co-operation, she'd be worth two men as an ally, fiancé or no fiancé.

He said: "If I make a break and steal their horses, will you meet me at the edge of the woods? I need your help."

"Nay, not I. Know you not that Reinald's horse is the steed Bayard, wiser than most men, who would rouse his master in an instant?"

"Oh, damn. I know a man named Bayard, but he'll never wake anybody up."

"Besides," she added, "there's my promise to Astolph. After striving to snatch Roger from his guardian, 'twould be strange for me to undertake to restore him, would it not?"

Shea grinned. "He's already snatched. Or rather, he snatched himself. So your promise to Astolph has been carried out, in a way."

She frowned. " 'Twould take a schoolman to argue with you, Sir Harold. And truly I'd help the good Sir Reed and his lady, whom 'twould greatly pleasure me to see again. I'll do it. Look that you but slip the paladins, and I'll—but here they come to say good night."

The three paladins said good night with varying intonations. Reinald pointedly asked her if she wouldn't be lonesome or cold, an inquiry to which she replied with the bored air of one who was hearing it for the hundredth time.

THE HOUSE of the village headman was dark and smelled like an old goat. Astolph struck flint and steel together. They got a fagot fire going in the center of the place, which seemed to be the only hearth. A hole in the center of the ceiling let about a third of the smoke out.

Astolph carefully unwound his red-blue-brown scarf. Catching sight of Shea's eye fixed on it, he remarked "School," briefly, and then, "One can't exactly wear a tie in this country, you know. So I had this made."

"What school is it for?"

"Winchester," said the duke, with just the right accent of pride. "Oldest of 'em all, you know. Merlin's one of the trustees. Great thing, the public-school system."

"I went to a public school in Cleveland myself."

"Extrawdinry! I shouldn't have said they had public schools in your country. Nation of gentlemen after all, what?"

Before Shea could straighten out the duke on the difference between American public schools and the snooty private institutions that bore that name in England, Reinald lifted his head: "Peace, you twain. A pox take your babbling!"

"Righto," said Astolph. "But first I fancy I'd better make certain Sir Harold here doesn't wipe us in the eye. Oh, you're a man of honor and all that, old thing, but this is merely a sensible precaution." He had quietly picked up his big sword and now pointed it at Shea. "Lie quietly, old fellow, and take your medicine:

"You lie on a blanket of cloud, soft and white,
And you sleep, sleep, sleep through the murmuring night;
Your limbs are so heavy, your eyelids must close,
You're torpid; you're drowsy; you loll, nap, and doze—"

Shea knew it was the beginning of a sleeping spell. He fought to keep his mind alert, casting about for a counter-spell. In spite of himself he began to feel sleepy.

"Come, ye spirits who generate pandiculation,
And your brothers, who revel in wide oscitation—"

The spell corresponded pretty closely to hynotism in his own world. How to beat it? Especially when he was so damned slee-epy—

"Come, Morpheus, hither, and Somnus and Coma—"

What was it the boy in "Kim" had used? The multiplication table! If he could stay awake long enough—two times two is four, two times three is six—

"Lend a part of your winternap, Great Yellow Bear—"

The spell droned on. Six times six is thirty-six, six times seven is forty-two, six times eight is forty-eight—

"Sleep! I, by this authority, conjure you."

It was over. Shea lay with his eyes closed but his brain wide open, figuring twelve times thirteen. He heard Astolph get up. Reinald's voice came drowsily, as though he were speaking through fur, "Will he sleep till the morrow?"

"Through several morrows, I should say," chuckled Astolph. "I gave him a jolly good dose."

"Almost drove me drowsy-y," drawled Reinald. "And Roland's snoring." He rolled over and, in less than a minute, was making it a duet.

SHEA WAITED, wishing his nose would stop itching, or that Astolph would quiet down so he could scratch it without the certainty of being caught out. His eyebrow began to itch, too. His face was all one concentrated itch. He contorted it desperately. Astolph turned over. Shea, not daring to open his eyes, froze his countenance to uncomfortable immobility again. The duke made another turn, loosed a sigh of comfort, and seemed to drift off. But it was quite ten minutes—every one of which Shea counted—before he dared open his eyelids just a flicker.

There was a touch of light at the center of the room where the fire was dying, an oblong of gray that must be the door. The three figures in the straw near him were darker blacks in the blackness of the hut, perfectly motionless. To make matters certain, he lay still for another ten minutes. Not a motion, not a murmur from the paladins. The dark gray patch of the door turned briefly bright blue, then gray again. Far away thunder purred softly.

Shea thought some hard things about the weather. If a storm came up, it would rain through the hole in the roof, and Astolph at least would wake up. The first thing the three did would be to look for him. If he were going to make a getaway, it had better be now.

He moved his hands slowly in the straw beside him, gathering up the scimitar, turban, coat. At the next rumble he rolled to his feet, took two cautious steps, and then, as an afterthought, plucked Roland's cloak from a peg in the wall. He slid out.

A flash showed a huge pile of thunderheads nearby, and the sound rolled closer. A little puff of wind whirled down the village street and then the air went quiet again.

The hippogriff was huddled where Astolph had left it, head down and eyes closed. It trembled miserably in the lightning flashes, its feathers stirring in the vagrant dashes of wind. Shea touched it, but the beast did not look up, bound by Astolph's magic. It would take more time than he had and perhaps more skill to release it from its spell. A drop struck his hand.

There was a brilliant flash and an avalanche of thunder. Shea thought he heard a shout from the headman's house. He gripped the cloak round him and ran, just as the rain came pattering down.

Belphebe had not told him what direction to go, but he headed straight on along the village street and to the edge of the forest beyond. Sure enough,

as he reached the edge of the trees, she stepped out before him, wide awake as an owl and as confident.

"Did they—" she said. A crash of thunder drowned the rest of her words.

"I think the thunder probably woke them up," said Shea, hanging the cloak around her. "How are we going to get out of here?"

"Is it not an hour for your flying broom, friend?"

"Damn, we should have thought of that sooner. We can't find feathers in this dark. Anyway, it would be plain suicide to try to fly it through a storm like this. How about your woods magic?"

"I have tried a call, but unicorns there are none in these glades. Natheless, there is yet one hope." She whistled a tune, somewhat like that which had called the unicorn but longer, more fluting.

SHEA STRAINED his eyes toward the village. He was sure he saw figures moving under the murk of night and storm. He heard a trampling behind. A voice shouted over the swish of the trees to the wind, which had now struck in earnest: *"Whee-he-he-he-he!* Who calls?" Another voice repeated: *"Whee-he-he-he!* Who calls?"

"Belphebe of the Wood, daughter of Chrysogone of Fairie!"

"In whose name call you us?" bellowed the first voice.

"In the name of Silvanus and Ceres."

"What desire you?"

"To be carried farther and faster than man can run or beast gallop."

The tramplers closed in. Shea smelled damp horse, and in the next flash saw the voices belonged to centaurs. The larger of the two said: "Who's here? Is it our mission to bear him as well?"

"Aye."

"Is he of our band by the spell of wood, wold and fountain?"

"Nay, but that am I, and he is a friend in need."

"Whee-he-he-he! We are forbid by a great oath to take those not under the spell of the three mysteries."

"Hey!" cried Shea. Another flash had shown him the three paladins, leading their mounts straight toward where he stood. "What's this about mysteries? Those lugs'll be here in a couple of minutes."

"There is a ritual, Sir Harold," said Belphebe, "through which all must pass before admission to the fellowship of the trees."

"O. K., skip it. You go on. I'll shin up a tree or dodge 'em."

"Nay, think not Belphebe so lightly deserts her friends. I'll try the power of arrows on these high and potent lords first, though it be said Roland is invulnerable."

"It won't work, kid," said Shea. The pursuers were a bare two hundred yards away, and the persistent lightning flashes were reflected from chain mail. "They're all armored." Then inspiration came. "Wait a minute, I

used to be a boy scout, and had to pass an examination for that. Would that do?"

"What's this?" asked the larger centaur. "I know not the chapter, yet—" Shea snapped out a quick account of the organization. The centaur conferred briefly with his companion. The centaur turned back. "It is believed we can take you, man, though your words are the first we hear of such a tale."

Before he had finished the sentence, Belphebe had vaulted lightly onto his back. Shea scrambled onto the other centaur. Its back was wet and slippery.

"Ayoi! Ready, brother?" said Shea's mount.

"Ready. *Whee-he-he-he-he!*"

"Whee-he-he-he!" Shea had never ridden bareback before. He felt far from secure.

"Put your arms around and hold on," said Shea's centaur. He did so, and nearly fell off with surprise. The centaur was a female.

As they moved through the trees, Shea looked over his shoulder. Another lightning flash gave him a glimpse of the paladins through the rain before the woods hid them. The hippogriff, its feathers bedraggled, looked more melancholy than ever.

VIII.

THE CENTAURS halted on a smooth knoll. Behind them rose the spurs of the western Pyrenees, and before them the country rolled and flattened away into the high plateaus of Spain. The sun was just pinking the crests.

"Here we rest," said Belphebe's centaur. "We cannot take you farther, for the Amir's camp is visible, and the forests lie behind. Moreover, we must hasten back for the races."

Shea slid off. His legs were stiff, his eyes red, and his teeth felt as furry as chows. Belphebe jumped down lightly. Shea wondered how she did it. They thanked the centaurs. The centaurs waved and galloped away as though they had not already been going all night, shouting their *"Whee-he-he-he!"* after the travelers.

Shea shaded his eyes to look. Through the early-morning haze they could just see a village three or four miles away. Beyond it a patch covered with little tan bumps stretched down a hillside. Those would be the tents of Agramant's camp.

Shea gave Belphebe a long, long look. He was trying to fix her face in his memory, not knowing how many more chances he'd have. This business of light-heartedly pretending that all was platonic in the Pyrenees was perhaps harder than clean, permanent severance. Once Chalmers was extricated—

"What is it?" she asked. "Have I a spot on my nose?"

"Several of 'em," he grinned. "They call 'em freckles where I come from, and I like 'em. But I was thinking, this Saracen camp probably has some pretty tough babies in it. I don't know that it's a good idea for the

most beautiful girl in the world to go strolling up to it. They might get ideas—"

"Fie," she interrupted. She held up her bow. "While I have this, I fear no lechers, Christian or Musselman. And the young Med—" She broke off, from tact or embarrassment. "Let us forth, Sir Harold Smooth-tongue," she finished.

As they started, she gave a small yawn. Shea grinned. "Don't tell me *you're* sleepy, kid?"

"Aye, Sir Harold, even I. Could I but find a grove—yet this land, meseems, is bare as a priest's poll."

"Shucks, why don't you try a regular bed for once? That town ahead ought to have some kind of an inn. Honest, it's fun sleeping in a bed."

They trudged toward it, arguing amiably. Belphebe yielded far enough to try one experience of bed.

The town had an inn, a small place marked by a bush over the door. Nobody seemed abroad in it yet. Shea banged at the door. The innkeeper stuck his head out, blinking at the unshaven man in Saracen costume and the golden-haired girl carrying an unstrung longbow. Presently he was at the door in his nightshirt, looking his astonishment at a request for breakfast and lodging.

"No baggage?" he asked doubtfully. "Ah, 'tis my regret and perhaps my loss, but I fear me I must ask your lordship to pay in advance."

He led them upstairs and pushed open a couple of doors. "Two rooms vacant," said he. "Your lordship may have his choice."

"I'll take both," said Shea.

"What! What in the name of the seven archfiends does your lordship want with both?"

"That's my business," said Shea with some asperity. He had caught a faint gurgle of laughter from Belphebe. A handful of the money Chalmers had given him clinked in his hand. "Do I get 'em or not?"

The innkeeper bowed from the waist, his face plainly showing he thought Shea insane. "As your lordship wishes. I regret I must ask double price for both."

"Hey, that's not right—"

"My infinite sorrow. But the Amir's army is so near to the south, and he is commandeering all facilities for the high officers. Should he discover I gave rooms to mere civils, my danger is extreme, and I am like to have to pay the price of the room to his treasury." Shea, who was not a good bargainer, gave in.

With breakfast came the familiar and delightful smell of real coffee. Shea, who had been missing his regular five cups a day, took a big sip. He almost gagged. The coffee was so saturated with sugar as to be practically a sirup. He asked for a cup of unsweetened black. The innkeeper, grumbling, got it.

Shea told Belphebe: "This is as bad as a roadside diner. They're always putting things in the coffee. I'll tell you about diners one of these days."

The girl did not answer. Her face had fallen a trifle when they entered the place. By the time they headed for their rooms, she was actually gloomy. To Shea's question she answered: "I know not what makes it, Sir Harold, but these four walls fill me with a sense of doom. Thus it has always been, wherefore I chose the life of a free huntress."

Shea said: "That's what we call claustrophobia in my world. I might be able to cure it by psychoanalysis."

"What say you? Is that a spell of your making?"

"Sort of." He yawned comfortably. "But just now I'm too dead on my feet to start. Good night, or good morning, or something."

THE BED was a straw-stuffed contraption that could only be called good in comparison with the floor of the headman's hut. But Shea regarded it fondly. He lay down on it, just to test the feel before undressing. Boy, oh, boy, it was good to be able to close your eyes—

There was a clack of feet on the stairs and loud voices. Shea sat up, blinking sticky eyes. He looked out the window and observed the sun on the horizon. He must have dropped off and slept all day. No, wait a minute, he remembered that when he had entered the room, the sun was on the same side it now was. So he could only have dozed off for a minute or two. Funny, how refreshed even a little nap like that made one—and then he realized that the sun had been well above where it now was when he drifted off. He must have slept the clock around, and this was the next dawn.

Voices. He stiffened at noting that one of them was a woman's—Belphebe's. He bounded from the bed and through the door.

There were a dozen armed Saracens in the lobby of the inn. A pair of brawny men were gripping Belphebe's arms. One had a blackening eye. The other had lost his turban and had a scratched face.

Shea jerked his scimitar loose and came downstairs three steps at a time. Before he could reach the girl's side, somebody thrust out a foot. The hardwood floor smacked Shea's chin, and a quarter of a ton of Saracens landed on his back. Somebody stepped on his right hand and took away the scimitar.

"A well-conditioned rogue," said a commanding voice judicially. "'Twill do for your band, Tarico, I think."

"My lord Dardinell!" put in a high-pitched voice. "I do protest! I had marked her this long time, and the maid—"

"Silence!" the first voice cut in. "Is not the Amir lord of us all and Commander of the Faithful? Would you dispute his choice of any woman, Medoro?"

The voice that belonged to Medoro shut up. One of the Saracens jerked Shea to a sitting posture. A richly dressed man with a spiked helmet, surmounted by a crescent, seemed to be boss. That would be Dardinell. Behind

him, the distressed-looking youth with the fuzzy cheeks, would be Medoro. The innkeeper had prudently disappeared.

A burly ruffian with a long, drooping mustache, felt Shea's biceps. "You'll pass," said this one.

"Who are you?" snarled Shea.

The burly one reached out and cuffed Shea snappily across the mouth. "Tarico al-Hadi, Commander of the Red Shar under his sublime lordship, the Amir Agramant. Learn respect and your duties first, slave, and you'll make a proper soldier one of these days. Come along."

They hauled Shea to his feet, tied his wrists behind his back, and pulled him through the door. A group of horses were hitched to rings set in the outer wall of the inn. On five of these sat dejected-looking parties tied as he himself was. He was prodded onto one of the beasts; Belphebe was lifted to the back of another, sitting side-saddle. Shea's mind wandered to appropriately horrible tortures for the men who were handling her. He cursed himself for not having proceeded with more caution.

They set off at a gallop. Shea gripped the saddle with his bound hands. After a few moments he adjusted himself to the movement.

THE RECRUIT on his left spoke up: "I hight Malerico. Give me your name, brother in misfortune, for 'tis ill to be in such a place without another's acquaintance."

"Name's Harold Shea."

"Harr al-Sheikh. Are you indeed a chieftain?"

"I inherited it," said Shea ambiguously. "What made these birds pick on the inn where I was staying?"

"They saw the maid, asleep on the roof. Ha, quoth my lord Dardinell, here's a pretty swallow on a lonesome perch, and orders all thither. That they should pick up a healthy young man and a proper Saracen at the same time, they esteem high fortune. They hold you're bound to be a lucky man, Harr al-Sheikh."

Shea hoped that Belphebe realized the results of letting her claustrophobia get the best of her. But something might be done with these birds' idea that he was a lucky man.

It was hard to carry on a conversation while bumping along. Shea and Malerico presently gave up the attempt. In an hour or so they reached the tents Shea had seen from afar. The place was larger than he had thought. A line of pickets on horseback were passed, and then one of the sentries on foot, most of them lolling under the shade of whatever scanty thorn trees grew beside the road. The camp itself had a ditch and palisade stretching in either direction as far as Shea could see. At the gate, their cavalcade was held up by a long line of donkeys laden with firewood, walking across the gangway.

Inside, there were striped tents in all directions. The smoke of several thousand breakfast campfires made Shea's eyes smart. Men were eating and

shouting everywhere, while women and ragged, yelling children raced about.

Tarico and his press gang came to a halt before an enormous tent nearly in the center of the encampment. Dardinell, Medoro, and their men turned off down an alley of tents with Belphebe. Shea could see Medoro arguing with his chief, and Dardinell saying "No" over and over.

The other recruits crawled off their horses. Shea's own head was too full of thoughts about how to get himself and Belphebe out of this jam to notice, till a one-eyed man yelled at him: "Down, dog of a pig!"

Shea, just in time, restrained himself from answering back, and slid off his horse. One-eye took a cut at him with a riding whip. It didn't hurt particularly, but Shea noted the man on his private list of those who would never be missed.

"Go on, go on, get in line, foul scoundrel!" screeched One-eye. Shea stumbled after his fellow victims. Inside the tent a man squatted cross-legged on a fat cushion behind a low table. A line of perhaps forty men led up to the table. Shea found himself just behind Malerico as a soldier came down the line, cutting their bonds. He looked back; the door of the tent was covered by a pair of Moorish guards with drawn scimitars. Their expression said plainly that they just hoped someone would try to get away.

The line shortened rapidly in shuffling steps. The seated man asked each recruit his name and home, and rattled an oath at him. The man repeated after him, "In the name of God the Omnipotent, I swear." As soon as he had said the words, another soldier beside the table took from a bag a small copper coin and slapped it into the recruit's palm.

Shea murmured to Malerico: "Have they got any exemption for conscientious objectors?"

"For what? I never heard—"

"Never mind," said Shea. He wondered what would happen if he claimed exemption on the ground he was an unbeliever. It might be worth risking; and on the other hand they might take his head off for luck.

"Name?" snapped the clerk to a recruit a few places in front of him.

"Moseilamabdalaziz of Algezire," replied the recruit.

"What?"

"Moseilamabdalaziz."

"We'll call you Aziz. You're son of?"

"I don't know. My mother never told me."

"Do you swear in-the-name-of-God-the-just-the-gracious-the-powerful-to-serve-and-obey-the-supreme-lord-the-Amir-Agramant-with-all-your-heart-and-soul-till-death-or-the-Amir's-grace-shall-release-you?"

"In the name of God, the Omnipotent, I swear."

"Next! Name?"

"Galsvinto. But, look here, you do ill to enroll me. I'm a Christian."

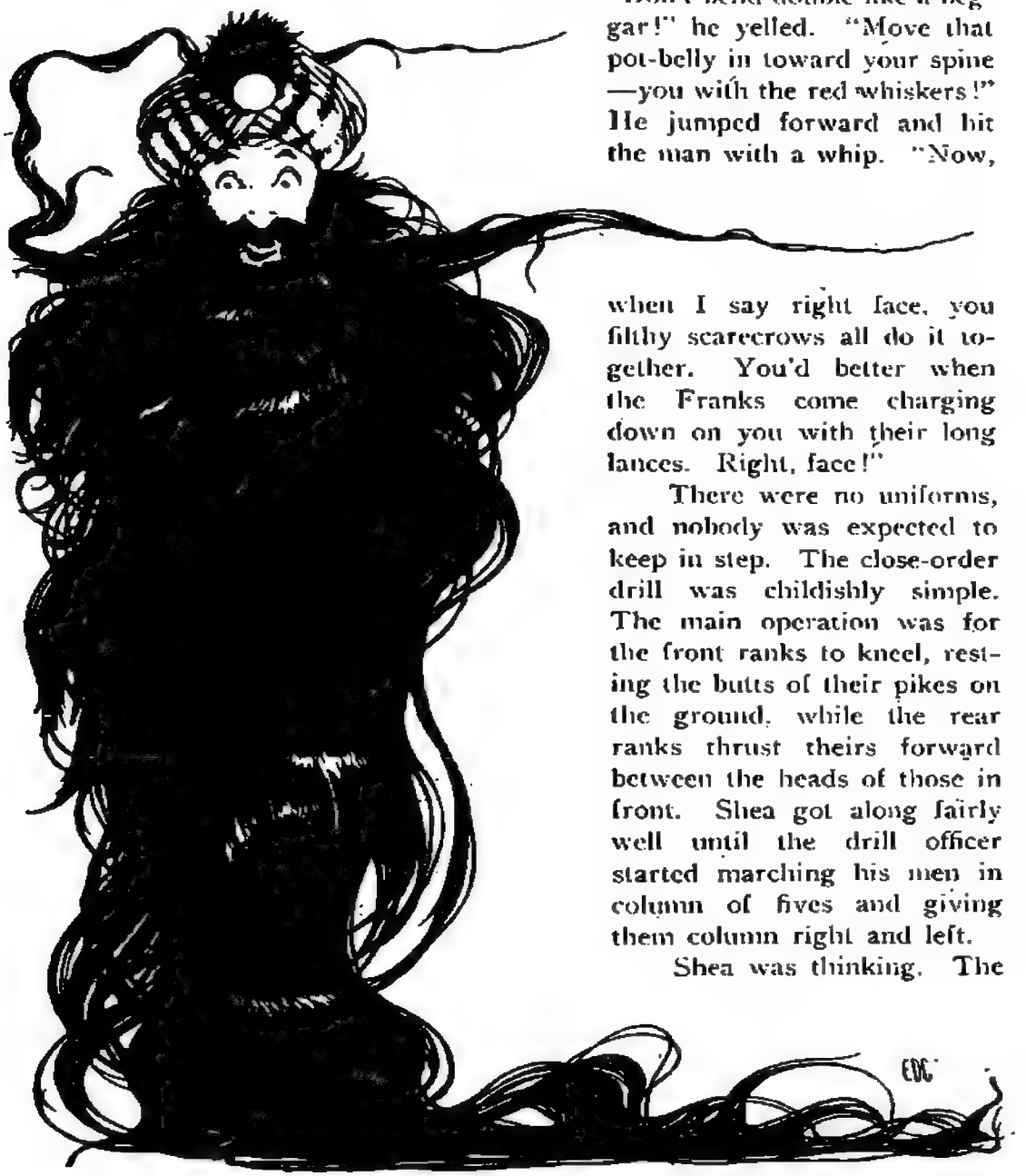
"Oh! Our great Amir, just and merciful, forces no man to fight against his folk. Ho, Haddad! Give this man twenty lashes for the chastening of his spirit, and set him to dig latrines for the faithful. Next!"

When Shea's turn came, he allowed himself to be enrolled as Harr al-Sheikh without comment.

IX.

THEY STOOD in a block five men by twenty. All, including Shea, were stripped to the waist, and each had a pike in his right hand.

One-eye was screaming instructions about the position of a soldier. "Don't bend double like a beggar!" he yelled. "Move that pot-belly in toward your spine —you with the red whiskers!" He jumped forward and hit the man with a whip. "Now, when I say right face, you filthy scarecrows all do it together. You'd better when the Franks come charging down on you with their long lances. Right, face!"



There were no uniforms, and nobody was expected to keep in step. The close-order drill was childishly simple. The main operation was for the front ranks to kneel, resting the butts of their pikes on the ground, while the rear ranks thrust theirs forward between the heads of those in front. Shea got along fairly well until the drill officer started marching his men in column of fives and giving them column right and left.

Shea was thinking. The

recruits' tents and drill ground seemed to be right in the middle of things, with plenty of guards all around. If he got out, it would have to be by magic. That would take time, and God knew what would have happened to Belphebe by—

"Halt!" screamed the drillmaster. Shea looked up. The company had done column right, but Shea, deep in his meditations, had kept on in a straight line till he was a dozen paces away from them.

One-eye ran up, foaming with rage. He hit Shea twice with his whip. "Get back there, you stinking mass of corruption! Do that yet once again, and I'll put you with the Christians!"

Shea went, welts rising on the skin of his shoulder.

BACK in the big elliptical tent where he had joined the other rookies, Shea was just beginning to relax, when he heard a wailing cry from outside. As he looked round in bewilderment, all the others flopped down on their knees, facing one wall of the tent, bumping their heads to the ground and muttering. Just in time, Shea realized that noon would be one of the Saracens' numerous times of prayer, and followed their example.

The prayer over, he hunted up Malerico, who seemed glad to see him. Shea asked about the next part of the program.

"We lunch," said Malerico. "After that we make what merriment we please, sobeit we stay within the camp."

"You been through this before?"

"Not I. But my brother was of the forces, and slain on the last expedition to Frank-land to boot. He had no luck." Malerico's thin face turned from mournfulness to positive despair.

"What do you mean, he had no luck?" asked Shea.

"Why, he was as good a man as you'll find in a day's journey. But had the misfortune, you see, to have no money, therefore was unable to buy a horse and had to stay a pikeman. Ah, 'tis evil for us poor foot soldiers in battle."

"What's this?" Malerico was getting ahead of him. "Would he be any better off in the cavalry?"

"Why, the natural way of battles." Malerico's scorn of his ignorance was obvious. "We, of the pikes, go forward, d'you see, and take the first shock? It breaks the strength of the Frankish knights as they come riding down, and mayhap throws a few of them from the saddle, so that all our great lords and princes can ride in on them after and claim the victory. That's what it is to be a noble; you gain what other men work for. The Franks make like use of their infantry. And even if the men on horseback never come to batter at each other, they claim to be heroes by reason of slaughtering us poor folk. Ah-h-h"—he made a long, guttural sound of disgust—"please, God, we'll have no battle this time but only a town taken to sack."

AFTER an unexhilarating meal, Shea curled up on the pallet that had been assigned to him, and began working on the problem of spells. He felt like a student engineer asked to design a bridge without slide rule or textbooks. In the basic principles of magic he thought he was well grounded, probably better than most of the sorcerers in this world. But under Chalmers' guidance he had given most of his attention in magic to theory. The question was to find practical application for such a principle as that of contagion. He had had enough magical experience to realize the gap between sound theory and practical application. That haystack of whiskers was an example.

But it could be done. It had been done. Now, what would be a good spell to work out? If—

A voice, high and somewhat adolescent, said loudly: "Are you not Harr al-Sheikh?"

Medoro was standing over him. Shea said yes, he was, in a voice he tried to make cordial. But the fact that Belphebe was attracted by this too-pretty young man had put two strikes on him in Shea's opinion already.

"It were better if we talked in private," said Medoro, looking around slyly. He was wearing a fancy new helmet with gold damascening on it and fine chain mail hanging down at sides and back. They strolled out together, and Medoro, still cautious, led the way to a section of the drill ground where they could see anyone approaching. It was hot. They sat.

"You're a friend of Belphégor's, are you not?" the Saracen asked.

"Yes. But her name is really Belphebe."

"Belphégor, Belphebe, or beldame—what matters it? She's a charming wench, oh, lovely." His eyes were rapt. "From your valiant attempt to free her this morning, noble sir, I deemed you must count yourself her friend. Oh, tell me, what can we do? She's been taken to Amir Agramant's harem."

SHEA winced. The young man seemed sincere enough, yet there was a peculiar tone in his words, as though he were reciting a carefully learned lesson.

Medoro continued: "I dare not push matters deeper with Lord Dardinell. He has the most awful temper! Wherefore have I renounced my allegiance to *him*, and have joined the Amir's royal guard." He indicated the helmet. "Lord Dardinell doesn't yet know it, but I'm safe. Agramant will protect me. Now hear: Agramant holds court of justice this afternoon. My darling is safe till night, when he'll come to visit his new concubine. You'll help me rescue her?" He gripped Shea's arm.

"How?"

"I know not. I am but one poor, weak squire amid this host. But you are adroit—"

"Just a minute," said Shea. "Have you heard whether a big guy named Roger has joined the army lately?"

"That coarse pig? Aye, he's here, all the loathly two hundred pounds of him, in the next tent to my own."

"You don't like him?"

"No more than I would some great rough ox. How can one like or dislike such a creature? He wouldn't know a poem if he heard one, not being sensitive as I am. Him and I met at Castle Carena, when I journeyed thither in the train of my Lord Dardinell."

"O. K. I need Roger in my business. Specifically, my business is to kidnap him back to Carena."

Medoro smiled. "That was a splendid jest on the clumsy brute! He's never so unhappy as when under his uncle's thumb and never so joyous as when knocking heads about in some such place as this."

"Fine," said Shea. "You help me collect Roger, and I'll do that I can about Belphebe."

The handsome face dissolved into lines of fear. "That awful man? Not I, no, no! Why, he'd have you in two parts with one blow of his scimitar!"

"Take it or leave it," said Shea coolly. He really wanted to shout. "No, never mind this nonsense. Let's get Belphebe out of there and forget the rest!" He could back down, if Medoro wouldn't play.

But Medoro said: "You're mad. But they say you are a man of lucky moments, and my own astrologer confirms it." He looked sly. "Oh, I consulted him before I came to see you. I do assure you, I do nothing without thought. I'll do it, then, if you'll but promise not to leave me to fight Roger alone."

"O. K. Hm-m-m, wonder if you could get me past that bird at the entrance of this section of the camp and out from among the recruits?"

"Oh, not I. I'd hardly dare risk it, friend Harr. There have been so many desertions of late that the penalties have grown weighty."

This twerp is going to be no use but as a pair of hands, thought Shea. "Well, just sit here a minute," he said, "and let me figure on a spell. I think I can make enough magic to get us by." He sat silent for a few minutes, thinking furiously.

Then he borrowed Medoro's dagger. Slipping over to the nearest row of tents, he cut eight long slivers of wood from the nearest tent peg.

Two of these he stuck in the brim of Medoro's helmet so they projected like horns. Two more went in his own turban. Another pair he inserted under his upper lip hanging down like tusks. He persuaded Medoro to do likewise with the remaining pair.

That ought to do for what Doc Chalmers called the "somatic" portion of the spell. As for the verbal, how could he do better than Shakespeare, slightly modified for the occasion? Shea spun round on his heel, chanting in a low voice:

> "Black spirits and white, red spirits and gray,
> Mingle, mingle, mingle, you that mingle may;
> Fair is foul, and foul is fair,
> Change, oh, change the form we bear!

"O. K., come along," he whispered to Medoro.

They sauntered toward the gate of the picketed drill field. Over in one corner a man was breaking a restive horse. The guard at the gate snapped to attention as they approached. He took one look at them, gasped "The Jann!" and ran for his life. His mate on the other side of the gate, looked, turned a curious mottled color, and screamed "The Jann!" He fell down and tried to bury his face in the dry grass.

Shea grabbed Medoro's hand and pulled him around the corner of a big tent. "Quick," he said, "how do we get to your tent? We want to keep off the main avenues."

Medoro led him zigzag through the encampment. Behind them the guard was running and screaming. They could hear voices as he gasped out his incredible tale. Shea began to get winded stepping over tent ropes; this was like a hurdle race. But at last Medoro rounded a corner and pulled him into a small but ornate tent. The amount of silk with which it was hung made Shea wonder if he hadn't landed in an annex to the harem. There was an elegantly gilded lute in one corner.

Shea made himself comfortable among the fringed cushions, while Medoro went out to inquire for Roger. Roger, it seemed, was off hunting or something, and would not be back for some time.

"What's your rank in the guards?" asked Shea.

"Captain," said Medoro. "I am the leader of fourscore men."

Shea wondered at the vagaries of a system that gave such a rank to this languishing poetic youth. Probably money had something to do with it. But now he was busy. "Can you bring them here, three or four at a time?"

Medoro thought he could. Shea had him bring in a single night guard for a trial run of the scheme he proposed first. Under his direction, Medoro ordered the man to sit down and relax. Shea lit the little Greek oil lamp with a floating wick, which Medoro kept in his tent. The lamp was placed behind the soldier, while Shea dangled one of Medoro's jeweled bracelets before the man's eyes. He twirled it between his fingers so that the bracelet spun this way and that, meanwhile repeating as much as he could remember of the sleeping spell Astolph had used on him.

Whether it was hypnosis or the spell, or the combination, Shea was not quite certain, but it worked. Presently he said: "Can you hear me?"

"Aye," said the man, tonelessly.

"You will obey my commands."

"Aye."

"The Amir wants to surprise the camp. Discipline has been getting lax. Do you understand?"

"Aye."

"As soon as the sunset prayer is over, you will draw your sword and run through the camp, cutting tent ropes."

"Aye."

"You will cut all the tent ropes you can, no matter what anyone says to you."

"Aye."

"You will forget all about this order until the time for action comes."

"Aye."

"And you will forget forever who gave you the order."

"Aye."

"Wake up!"

The man blinked and came out of it. Shea told him he could go, and slipped a piece of money in his hand. At the door Medoro said: "You remember your orders, Chelindes?"

"Aye, your nobility. Watch well the camp; should any move, challenge him; should he make a gesture, call an officer. There were—there were—"

"No others," said Shea firmly. "Go, and send in the four men Medoro told you to send."

WHEN the last of the fourscore guardsmen had been given his orders, Shea felt tired. Being simple-minded fellows, they passed under the combined spell and hypnotism readily enough, except for one. This soldier exhibited the staring eyes of a maniac at the first suggestion, and had to be ejected quickly. But counting out those who could not be located, this left sixty-eight successful hypnotisms in one afternoon—an achievement, even for a psychologist more experienced than Harold Shea.

When he had finished, Medoro picked up the lute. He settled himself among the cushions and began to strum a melancholy tune. "Sir Harold," he said, in little jerks as though so interested in the music as to be unwilling to interrupt himself, "what do—we now? Meseems—your plan—goes not—far—"

"Oh, for Pete's sake," said Shea, "stop banging at that thing! I know my plan doesn't go far; I've only been playing by ear so far."

"And I also." Medoro sighed wistfully as he put down the lute. "But what could I do more than compose a lament for my lady in durance? It's not too bad," he added. He cocked his head on one side, swinging a finger to the beat of the music he was hearing with an inner ear.

Shea stared coldly at this young man, who regarded the loss of Belphebe mainly as an occasion for composing a lament that was not too bad. But before he could say anything, a burly shadow fell across the door of the tent. It was Roger.

"The peace of God be upon you, Medoro," said the big man. "Ho, aren't you the fellow who was at Castle Carena with my uncle and Sir Reed?"

"That's me," said Shea. "I've joined your army."

"So? Right glad am I to see you are something more than half a man. Though I always thought it." The surly face took on a comic expression of wisdom. "There'll be some rare fighting soon when we meet the Franks."

"Sit by us," said Medoro courteously. "Are there tidings?"

"There are tidings, ho . . ho! The officers who gather recruits, by mistake brought in a pair of jinn. This afternoon the accursed ones put on

their proper forms and assailed the guards in the section of the recruits of the Red Shar. One of them is near dead; 'tis said the Jann sucked his soul through one ear. But 'tis a merry joke on Tarico, ho ho!" He slapped his thigh.

Shea saw Medoro color, and was glad Roger did not observe such things. "When do we move on the Franks?" asked Medoro.

"God and the Amir Agramant know. A fortnight or less, perhaps. We lack for slingers and—" he went off into a discussion of military technicalities.

Shea got up and strolled around behind Roger, looking at the objects that hung from the walls of the tent. He took down a big dagger with an ornate, gold-inlaid handle. He hefted it by the blade and looked at the back of Roger's head.

"—but he says 'twill hardly be before Zu'lhijja. What stirs you so, Medoro? You're as nervous as a spider on a hot grid."

There was a spike sticking up out of Roger's turban. That meant he had a helmet on underneath the cloth. If Shea hit him with that on, the dagger handle would merely go *bong*, and Roger would turn and grapple.

A sickly smile ran around Medoro's face. "Nought. My entrails—"

Shea reached down, grasped the spike firmly, and switched it forward, tumbling helmet and turban over the big man's face.

"Ho!" cried Roger, "what—" and grabbed upward.

Thump! The dagger handle hit the top of his shaven skull. Shea pulled the helmet back in place before the big man rolled over and down.

MEDORO'S HANDS were fluttering as though to beat off invisible insects. "Now what will we ever do? How shall we get him from here?" he whispered.

"Simple. Have you got a couple of extra turbans?"

"Aye. But they are my best. Worked in silk of Cordova. Surely, there is something—"

"Oh, can it, and help me get him tied up. If he comes to, you won't be worrying about silk of Cordova."

Medoro helped, twittering with excitement. They wound Roger in turban cloths till he looked like a cocoon. Medoro turned eyes the size of saucers toward Shea. "How now?" he asked.

"Isn't it about dinner time?"

"Mahound! You think of dinner at an hour like this? You must be made of ice! As insensitive as Roger himself!"

"Maybe so. But we can't do anything more before the hour of evening prayer." Shea didn't feel half as nonchalant as he acted, but he couldn't help showing off a little before this half-baked poet. He repeated the request for something to eat. Medoro whistled up his personal slave and sent him for supper. Shea remarked casually: "Better cover Roger up with a rug, or something, before that guy comes back."

"But how are we to get into the Amir's pavil—"

"*Sh!* I'm thinking!"

"I cry your grace. But no need to be rude."

Shea thought, all through the meal. At the end he said: "I've had a little experience at the kind of magic that helps one fly through the air. If there were something we could fly with, I might be able to work up a spell."

Medoro made a desperate effort to swallow one of the sweetmeats with which the meal ended. He gave it up and took a sip of coffee instead. He looked down at the thick, rich carpet on which they sat. "In my city," he said, "they talk of the magic carpet of Baghdad. Had we one such—"

Shea snapped his fingers. "Right on the button! Here, pile off this thing. Get me some stuff for a small fire, one that'll make lots of smoke. Is there a feather in the camp? Fine, run and get it. Don't argue with me, damn it. This is important."

When Medoro returned with a small handful of twigs, some leaves, and a dozen feathers, he found Shea busily at work. The amateur magician had captured a couple of the big flies that buzzed by millions around the camp, looped a silken thread from his turban around them, and was fixing the other end of it to the fringe of the carpet. The flies buzzed angrily and tried to take off as he released them.

"Put those twigs in a little pile here, and light them," he said, rolling back the carpet to leave a little space on the ground bare. "Now, as soon as the fire takes hold, you put your leaves on it. It's got to smoke."

While Medoro was striking the light, Shea wove the feathers in with the carpet, carefully knotting them with the fringe. The flame spread among the twigs. Medoro dumped his leaves on it, and the fire emitted a perfect cloud of smoke. The leaves were aromatics of some sort, and made Shea cough as he recited the spell he had been composing:

"Be light—*cough!*—carpet, as the leaves you bear;
  Be light as all the clouds that fly with thee;
Soar through the skies, and let us now but share
  The impulse of thy strength. Let us be free
From—*cough! cough! cough!* If even
  The Roc and all the Jann could fly like we,
Then were they—*cough!*—right aërial indeed.
To you the spirits of the sky are given
That they may help us in our sorest need.
Cough—cough—cough!"

The smoke died. Medoro rubbed smarting eyes. "Your verse is not too bad for a tyro," he remarked critically, "yet I would say that there's a foot wanting in the fifth line, and the end is somewhat weak."

"Never mind that now," said Shea. "Help me get this big moose onto the carpet."

They rolled Roger over and wrapped him in an extra carpet from the back of the tent before dumping him on the edge of the flying—they hoped—

carpet. Together they hauled the front end to the door of the tent and knelt on it.

"When go we? When go we?" babbled Medoro.

"Calm your jitters, old man. We go when the trouble starts."

"But my darling, my charmer is in danger! The Amir will be on his way to her! Suppose this device moves not?"

"Then we'll think of something else. Now shut up." What else, Shea could not have said.

Medoro subsided, looking hurt.

The wailing cry of the imams split the evening sky. Medoro turned part way around where he knelt, salaamed and moved his lips. Shea crouched stonily.

The noise died down into the buzz of talk, jingle of mail, barking of dogs, and other camp noises. Somewhere on the far side a man was pounding an anvil. The shadows were lengthening and melting into one another.

An alien murmur rose through this symphony of sound. It grew into shouts of alarm, running feet, and a crashing as though an elephant were running among the tents.

"Hold on tight," said Shea. He drew back his arm and slashed at the tent roof with one of Medoro's extra scimitars. It split to reveal a sky already sprinkled with the earliest stars. Shea recited:

"By warp and by woof,
High over the roof,"

and had got that far when he heard a sword chop through one of Medoro's own tent ropes. The tent bellied inward from the sides. He hadn't told them to cut the ropes of *this* tent. But he hadn't told them not to. Too late now. He finished with a shout, just as the tent collapsed about them:

X.

THE CARPET swooshed up and out, its fringe flapping. Agramant's camp was in pandemonium beneath them. Tents were wobbling and collapsing everywhere. Some of them were as big as circus tents, and great was the fall thereof. As they came down, lumpy objects moved vaguely under the shrouding canvas. Over at one corner a tent had collapsed into a fire. Men were running circles around the blaze, trying to beat it out or bring water.

Medoro pointed to the biggest tent of all, one with a swarm of pennons fluttering from its multiple peaks: Agramant's pavilion. Shea leaned to one side, and the carpet did a wide curve round a neat bank toward it. Beneath them foreshortened men were rushing in every direction, shouting: "Treason! Murder! The Franks!"

The pavilion was a young city in itself. Beside the main tent, it had a score of lesser, outlying structures, with canopies connecting them. Around the whole, officers were setting in order a line of torch-holding soldiers, men of all different troops mixed in together, gathered up by the few who had managed to keep their heads in the confusion.

"Where's the harem?" yelled Shea. Medoro, clinging to the carpet with one hand, pointed with the other toward an elongated tent connecting up with the main one.

The carpet swooped low over the heads of the soldiers. One of them looked up, shouted, and brought a whole group of upturned faces in their direction. An arrow whizzed past. Then they were over the tangle of royal tents, out of range. They sailed past the roof of the harem tent, just missing it. As they did so, Shea leaned over the edge of the carpet and slashed at the fabric with the scimitar. He left a twenty-foot gash which the tension on the ropes pulled wider. Balancing his carpet by leaning, Shea circled the thing and came back. He slowed the carpet by pulling back on the fringe of its leading edge. They squeezed through the opening.

They were in a room full of women, soaring along just under the roof. The women scattered, screaming "The Jann! The Jann are here!"

The carpet moved smoothly to the nearest partition and stopped. Shea reached out and slit the camel's hair across. The room was a kitchen and empty, save for the furniture of its business. The next room held four eunuchs, throwing dice. These screamed at them in high, womanish voices. They slashed through into the next, which was empty but for a single lamp on a tabouret.

"Damn maze," said Shea. The outer tumult of the camp had been dampened to a whisper by the many thicknesses of cloth. Two more of these partitions, and the coolth of the outer evening was suddenly on their faces. The backs of the soldiers were only a little way from them. Shea hastily maneuvered the carpet around. He slashed his way into the tent again. But it was only the kitchen once more.

Shea maneuvered up to the kitchen's one un-slit wall. He slit it, and found their goal.

THE ROOM where the Amir's wives and concubines entertained their lord was full of priceless things. Over against the far wall, under a hanging pot from which eddied a slow smoke of incense, stood the biggest bed Shea had ever seen. On that bed a bound figure writhed.

Shea looked around the carpet. Roger was a shapeless bundle in the dim light. Medoro crouched flat, his eyes popping. Beside him was a little pile of cloths—the extra turbans, in silk of Cordova. Shea recited:

"By warp and by woof,
In the midst of the roof,
To save the fair maiden
Stand still and aloof!"

The carpet halted. Shea knotted the turbans together in reef knots. He gave one end to Medoro, flung the other down till it touched the bed, and climbed down. He missed his grip at the third knot and hit the bed with a plunk, but without damage.

The figure on the bed rolled over and glared at him with furious black eyes from under a disordered mop of graying hair.

It was the Amir Agramant, Commander of the Faithful, Protector of the Poor, the just and merciful Lord of Hispania, trussed, bound, and gagged with his own turban.

"Harold!" cried Belphebe's voice. Shea jumped a foot. The girl emerged from behind some draperies at the side of the bed, a dagger in her hand. She took in the situation at a glance and was up the improvised rope before he could touch it.

Shea took a good grip on the nearest knot and started to climb. The turban rope went slack and came tumbling down on his head.

"Hey!" cried Shea. He stumbled back, stepping on the Amir. He saw Medoro, crouched at the leading edge of the carpet, muttering. The carpet fluttered and began to move.

Shea opened his mouth. Before he could say anything, Belphebe leaned over the edge and cried: "Throw the end up!"

He did so. She caught it, took a turn round her waist, and called: "Come on!"

Shea was afraid of pulling her off. She was as strong as he, but he weighed a hundred and sixty. As he hesitated, a curtain was flung aside, and a troop of eunuchs waddled into the bedroom. They pointed and yelled shrilly. One of them waved a scimitar a foot wide. Shea went up the turban chain like a monkey. A thrown dagger swished past him.

"Get over and let a man run this thing!" he snarled at Medoro. He muttered to the carpet, and they slid through the gap in the tent wall out into the twilight. The fire at one side of the camp was still burning.

"My bow," said Belphebe. "I left it on the roof of that inn, and am unmanned without it. Perchance 'tis still there."

"O. K.," said Shea, setting a course for the town. He turned on Medoro. "Well, what's the alibi? Better make it damn good."

"I I—but friend Harr, I do crave your pardon. Meseems at times I overdo matters in attaining the sensitivity that is proper to a poet. Alas!" He bent his head. "When I lost the end of the bound turbans, I had no other thought than that all was lost. Ah, miserable thing! Ah, wretched me!"

"You damn Twerp," said Shea. "So you thought you'd sneak off and leave me, and then make a poem about it. Is that the idea?" Medoro sniffled.

Belphebe put an arm around Medoro's shoulders. "Ah, unhappy wight. I wot well, such actions leave a scar on the sensitive mind. Be not too rude with him, Sir Harold. He has a delicacy that we, who live by terrors, know not of."

"If I hear how sensitive he is just once more, I'm going to see how sensitive his neck is to breakage."

"Sir Harold! Would you have me hold you in despite? Think but how he helped and sustained you in this deed. Without Medoro you could never have descended the rope of turbans."

"O. K., O. K.," groaned Shea. "And with him I almost didn't get up. He's a hero. I don't know why we bothered trying to rescue you at all. You were doing all right when we came along."

It was Belphebe's turn to look hurt, as Shea observed with a trace of vindictive relish. "Oh, shame! Would you have me not defend myself against that vile Amir—ah, Harold, must you put me in your debt and then—" She began to sniffle, too.

Shea, feeling suddenly wretched, turned to the business of navigation. It had been a heroic exploit, and they should all have been elated. Instead of which—

Belphebe went back, walking gingerly on the yielding surface, and sat on the rolled-up rug. The rug made a sound between a grunt and a growl. The girl jumped up, making the carpet tip perilously. Roger had come to.

The town was below them, yellow gleams picking out the windows of the inn. Shea circled the carpet round the structure, and brought it down to a landing on the flat roof.

"I see it!" cried Belphebe. She ran over and scooped up bow and quiver. She did a little dance on the way back. Shea guessed that he still loved her.

"Now, what's the shortest way to Castle Carena?" he asked.

"Almost due northeast from here, by the star of the lion," said Belphebe, pointing. "Behold that trio of bright stars. The lowest lies under the pole."

They flew northeast through the gathering dark. The carpet was not very fast; Shea, looking down at the broken ground, guessed they were making between twenty and thirty miles an hour. The rolling plain gave place to the swollen, solid peaks of the mountains. Shea had to put his vehicle into a climb to avoid the crests. All three began to shiver, lightly dressed as they were. Medoro's teeth chattered. Shea had lost Roland's cloak somewhere along the way. He envied Roger, warmly wrapped in a rug.

That gave him an idea. They must be far enough for Agramant's riders to take two or three days to catch up with them, even if the Amir knew what route they had taken. Why not rest through the remainder of the night? He steered the carpet in toward a low, rounded peak, and set it down.

The rug grunted again as the rear of the flying carpet touched a stone. They unrolled it. Shea pulled Roger's gag out to hear what the young man had to say.

The perfect cavalier had plenty to say, beginning by calling them all dogs and pigs and then running up and down the chain of their ancestry. Medoro plucked at Shea's sleeve. "We cannot keep him tied up all the time, Harr al-Sheikh. He ahem uh—"

"Oh," said Shea, "I guess he can wait till morning. It wouldn't do to have him running around loose in the dark, and we'd lose all our sleep guarding him."

Roger, lying in a grassy spot, was as comfortable as he could reasonably expect to be. But the unreasonable man continued to fizz. He had exhausted his stock of invectives, and as he lacked the imagination to think up new ones, he was repeating himself. It was so dull that the others moved off to a little distance.

Belphebe and Medoro moved a little apart and sat on a rock, talking softly and looking at the bright, near stars. Medoro put his arm around the girl's waist. Shea guessed he didn't dare try more. Or maybe that was just the system poets used.

Shea couldn't help watching them, though he tried not to. He pulled a twig from the top of one scrubby little pine and bit into it, pretending it was his good old pipe. What the hell was the use in all this foolishness, anyway? Running around, risking his neck across a parade of universes, and having nothing to show for it. He'd go back to earth, finish taking his M. D., become a big-shot psychiatrist to the affluent screwy, make money, and marry his secretary. Adventure was just another phony—something to talk about over a Scotch and soda. And then they didn't believe you, or they told a better one.

Meanwhile, he'd better get some sleep. Medoro was to take the first turn at watching Roger. Shea hoped he wouldn't do something idiotic, like turning the perfect cavalier loose. He consoled himself with the thought that Belphebe would probably stand Medoro's watch and her own, too.

A wolf howled in the distance. Everybody rustled a bit at the sound. Another howl answered it. The howlers set up a duet. The howls became shorter and closer together. They ceased.

Lucky stiff, thought Shea. He meant the wolf.

XI.

"Now where the hell are we?" demanded Harold Shea.

"In the Pyrenees," said Medoro, quite correctly.

"I know," replied Shea. Below the edge of the carpet nothing was visible but rocky peaks, pine-clad slopes, and deep gorges, with now and then a metallic flash of water in them. "We've been flying northeast for hours, and all we get is more of the same. I think we ought to stop at a gas station and ask."

"I wot not what your words mean, as often enough," said Belphebe, "but there lies a road now below us."

"You have the damnedest eyes, kid. Where?"

She pointed. It was another mountain track like two or three they had

seen already, snaking down one side of a gorge, across a stream by stepping stones, and up the opposite slope.

Shea banked around and came down toward the track. Belphebe called his attention to four dots on the road. They resolved themselves into a man leading three laden asses.

Shea slanted down to within earshot of the man. "Hi, there!" he yelled.

The man looked up, and began to run, the asses rocking along behind him. Shea came closer. The man only ran faster, zipping around the hairpin turns.

"Fright him him not so," said Belphebe. "He will but leap a cliff and take the unknown terror instead of that he can see."

"I'm afraid you're right," said Shea. He slanted the carpet toward greater altitude and let the man vanish around a turn.

A moment later he caught sight of another indication of man—a little fan of detritus on the slope of a mountain. "Looks like a mine entrance," he said.

The carpet swept smoothly down toward it, and Shea made an easy landing on the level space at the front of the mine shaft.

A man appeared. He was old and whiskery, with a long, dirty robe.

"The saints preserve us!" said he, "Saracens!"

"Nothing to worry about, Father," said Shea. "We're just looking for some directions."

The man smiled. "Surely, surely, my son. There be great and good men of your race, and all respect the hermit who has nought but his poverty. Whither do you wish to go?"

"Castle Carena," said Shea, thinking that the old chap's protestations overdid it a little. He probably had something valuable in that mine, and was reasonably suspicious of anyone who wore a turban.

"You follow the road that way, and over the next pass you find yourself in the Valley of Pau. Beyond it lies the village of the same name; beyond the village a fork in the route. The fork to the right is somewhat overgrown, but it will take you direct to the Castle of Iron."

"Thank you, Father," said Shea. "Guess that must be the valley where Polacek went hunting for Roger. Astolph didn't know about the pass and the road through it." He grinned at the hermit as the latter held up two fingers in blessing. "We don't have to walk, though. Watch this."

They took their places on the carpet. Shea recited:

"By warp and by woof,
High over the roof
Of these mountains so high
Forthwith shall you fly!"

Nothing happened.

Shea repeated the verse. He tried several variations of the wording. Still nothing happened.

Belphebe spoke up: "Methinks I can unriddle this, Sir Harold. This hermit is a holy man, or religious, and he has blessed us. Whatever power the carpet had by magic is thus destroyed. 'Tis not the first time such things have happened, and belike not the last."

"Are you a holy man?" asked Shea.

The old man folded his arms. "In my humble way, my son, I strive to lead the sinless life."

"Oh, Lord!" Shea rolled up the carpet. He knew that it would not be enchantable for days. They unbound Roger's legs and made a loop in the knotted turbans to serve as a halter.

Something made a gruesome noise in the mine shaft. Shea cocked his head. "You got an ass, Father?"

The old man looked a trifle apprehensive. "You would not rob me of my stay and sole companion, my son?"

"No. I told you we weren't looking for trouble. I just wondered if you'd be interested in selling him."

The hermit smiled and disappeared into the shaft. Presently he was back with the ass. It was a big, tough-looking animal, quite adequate for their purposes. Shea asked how much. The hermit said he thought five bezants would be a fair price.

The money was paid over. Since it occurred to Shea that the carpet would be pretty useless, even out of the hermit's personal aura, he threw that into the bargain. Medoro looked sour.

IT TOOK THEM all day to reach the pass. Medoro developed a blister. He, of course, had to moan to Belphebe, who pulled his shoe off and bound up the injured toe. Shea put up with that. But he didn't like it when Medoro insisted on riding the ass. He had got the beast as a mount for Roger, not out of consideration for the perfect paladin's legs. Roger on donkey back, with his feet tied together under the animal's belly, was practically helpless and much less likely to make a homicidal break than Roger afoot. And three of them were none too many to handle such a customer.

But Belphebe backed Medoro's wails to ride. Shea had to admit that she rationalized the thing well. "You miss the mark, Sir Harold," she said. "'Tis not that he considers himself of higher position than we ourselves: nor that he fears his feet being hurt, but suppose we're attacked, by one party or another? Medoro's a third of our fighting strength, and if he's crippled, where are we?"

Shea gave in. Thereafter he spent three quarters of his time watching Roger. If there was an attack, it would probably be from that quarter. He even tried to calm the big bruiser by talk. Roger relaxed a bit at hearing that Shea was working for Atlantès.

But Shea soon wished he had never begun the conversation. Roger's only topic was the slaying of various enemies, with microscopic details.

Beyond the crest of the pass, they kept on for a mile or two in the gathering dusk to find a warmer and more sheltered spot. When they found it, Belphebe and Medoro went hunting. Shea was left to build a fire and listen to Roger's endless narrative of split heads and spilled guts.

They came back laughing in an hour, with four rabbits. After the meal, all felt better. Roger thawed to the sleepy indifference that was as near as he could get to geniality. Medoro, Shea had to admit, turned positively brilliant. He improvised ridiculous rhymes. He effectively parodied the one-eyed drillmaster of Agramant's camp. He did a superb imitation of Atlantès working out a complicated spell, including his dismay when the spell went wrong. Shea was laughing loud and carefree, when Medoro went serious.

"Look, you, friend Harr," he said, "whom my most gracious lady calls Sir Harold. Here we have a nice quandary, and I'd submit it to your arbitrament. Here's this lady whom I would wed, in all honor, but she's no Musselman, as you wit. Nay, she's not even full Christian, which is half a Musselman, but a heathen idolater. Neither will she accept my creed, holding it unfair to women, nor I join her paganism. What think you we should do?"

Shea smiled wryly. A fine question to ask *him!* He said: "Why don't you both join the Zoroastrians? That can't be far from either one, and would offer the least difficulty, I should think."

"A Magian!" said Medoro. "My Lord Dardinell has told me of them. He saw them east; great solemn men in high tiaras and long beards, who make it the duty of their creed to slay snakes. Why think you we should be like them?"

"Well, they hold the existence of equal and opposed powers of good and

evil, Ormuzd and Ahriman. Gets around the difficulty that's been puzzling all the good doctors of theology, both Christian and Musselman, for centuries: if God is good and God is omnipotent, how come there's evil?"

Medoro rubbed his chin. "I'll think on't," he said. "To me it seems, from what I've been told, that your Magian creed has not room enough for love and laughter. Oh, I'll swear by nothing that leaves me not free to do as I will."

"That is much the creed of the wildwood in itself," said Belphebe, "and we might well meet on such ground. But—"

The argument trailed on, getting involved. Shea lost interest. The subject of how those two were to marry was at best a painful one to him.

NEXT MORNING they breakfasted on the proceeds of Belphebe's hunting again. Shea said he doubted whether they could make Castle Carena that day, unless they bought some animals in the village of Pau.

Medoro looked at the girl. "Needs it that we go full length with them?" he said wistfully. "Surely, this very great and worshipful hero, Harr, can manage his prisoner to the castle."

Shea spoke up quickly: "You said you'd see me through on my quest, didn't you, Belphebe?"

"Aye, that did I. Nor will I desert in the name of the double rescue you have done for me, first from Busyrane, and now with this Amir Agramant." Her mouth turned down a trifle.

"Well," said Shea doubtfully, "if you really don't *want* to come—"

"Nay, I'll rather stay. Whatever faith one holds one must needs keep faith. We'll go with them, Medoro."

Medoro was dampened a trifle. But his spirits rose again quickly, and he was gay and cheerful till the time for departure. When Shea tried to make him walk instead of riding as on the previous day, he instantly developed a limp.

"My foot!" he moaned. "Ooooh! If I blister it more by walking, I am like to be less than useless to you. It might mean death for all were I—"

"You could walk all right when you went hunting last night," said Shea. "Let's see the foot."

"No unbeliever shall look on my naked feet!" cried Medoro. "You know right well, or should, Harr, that I'm sensit—"

Smack! Medoro sat down. He put a hand up to his cheek. Shea looked at tingling knuckles. His temper had gone where the woodbine twineth.

Medoro scrambled up and dodged behind Belphebe. "Dog of a pig!" he yelled. "Were I not a mere poor squire, and now a cripple to boot, I'd carve my name on your liver!"

Belphebe put an arm around him. "Fret not, good squire. 'Twas a most vile peasantish discourtesy, and Sir Harold owes you an apology, though I'm sure he meant no harm."

"You're damn right I meant harm, and I mean more of it!" roared Shea, trying to get at Medoro.

"Stay, gentles!" said Belphebe. "I hold Medoro blameless in this, yet I will not hear of his carving friends. And you, Sir Harold de Shea, make one more threat and you may count yourself lucky if ever I speak to you again. Now, this is my judgment; you shall strike hands, and Sir Harold, 'tis for you to make apology."

Medoro rode the ass. Shea, trudging behind him, wondered whether his lady-love was exactly bright.

UNDER the circumstances they were still short of Pau when night fell. They were in a high valley with the dry rocky bed of a spring stream beside them. Ahead the road climbed.

"I think we'd better camp here," said Shea. Belphebe unslung the bow from her back. Saying that she would try to get some supper, she slipped off.

Medoro shaded his hand against the setting sun. "Look," he said, pointing. "I'd swear that was a peach tree!" He climbed down from the ass and ran toward it. He returned a moment later with an armful of the fruit.

"At all events, they'll give us to wet our lips," he said. "I'm parched since we passed that last spring at noon."

An inspiration rose in Shea. "Suppose you look around here for another," he said, with careful indifference.

Medoro went, cheerfully singing some wailing Saracen ditty the while. As soon as he was out of sight, Shea plucked Roger's helmet from his head, took out the padding, stuck it in the ground on its spike, and put four of the peaches in it. The helmet made a magnificent picnic cup. Shea scratched the letters C, H, and O on the remaining peaches. He arranged them as Doc Chalmers had done when he so unexpectedly made the Scotch whiskey in Faerie. That had been an accident, but this time, Shea assured himself grimly, whatever happened would be on purpose. He leaned over the helmet. While Roger looked on, open-mouthed, Shea repeated the spell Chalmers had used on the previous occasion.

When Medoro returned to say he hadn't been able to find water, the helmet was brimming with a golden liquid, in which peach skins and peach pits floated. Shea fished these out.

"Never mind," he said, "I've got something here that will cure our thirst. It's a drink they use in my country."

Medoro sniffed. "Yaaai! It has a pleasant fragrance." He took a sip, and then coughed. "But it burns the throat. By the beard of the Prophet! If you've tried to poison me—"

"Not at all," said Shea. "Here, let me have some myself." He tasted. It was peach brandy, all right, and of excellent quality, but it certainly did have a kick. He judged it to be about one hundred and twenty proof.

"I would have more," said Medoro, his suspicions lulled. "Most gratifyingly it warms the entrails. Ho, let us give some to our prisoner!"

"Like some, Roger?" asked Shea.

"Aye. Though I'll still cut you in two like a cabbage stalk if I ever get my hands free."

The helmet went the rounds, and then again. By the time Belphebe was back with the proceeds of her hunt, there was only a little of the peach brandy left, which Shea had insisted on saving for her. He himself felt a pleasant glow, with a slight exhilaration and the feeling that his remarks were more brilliant than ever before. But as he had guessed, Roger and Medoro, brought up under the law of the Prophet, had not the slightest heads for liquor. The former was babbling about the number of heads he had cut off, and losing count every time he got beyond eight. Medoro lay on the ground, kicking his feet in the air, and weaving the perfect paladin's remarks into an impromptu ballad of immensely complicated rhyme-scheme.

As the girl appeared, Medoro sat up. He got on his feet, nearly turned a flip-flop, and staggered toward her.

"Ho, pretty wench, give your lover a kiss!" he bawled. He reached for her. Belphebe dropped her game, eyes wide in horrified surprise, and fended him off. He lost balance and sat down; tried to get up and missed. His brows contorted with intense effort. He tried again and made it.

"Come, my love," he cried:

"The night is warm and so am I.
The moon is up, the grass is dry;
The night's for love and so are we,
I mean myself and Belphebeeeeee—"

He dragged the last word till it ended in a giggle, which in turn ended in a hiccup. He spread his arms and ran at her.

Smack! Medoro sat down again. Shea triumphantly shouted: "A most vile peasantish discourtesy!"

The young Moor was on his feet again, his handsome features in a snarl. "So!" he shrilled, "You reject the love of the poor squire! You want some blundering ox with the brains of a pea pod, like these!" He indicated Shea and Roger. "Faugh! Like all women. I'll have no more of you, you pagan trollop!" Before any of them could guess his intention, he unhitched the ass, mounted it, and sent it galloping off in the direction from which they had come.

BELPHEBE stood at gaze for a second, then snatched up her bow and sent an arrow after him. It was too late.

"Sir Harold," said Roger, imperturbably, "what's that number that comes after twelve?"

"Thirteen."

"Ah, yes-s-s, thirteen. I never can remember the higher mathematic. Well, 'a thirteenth man had a curled much . . . mush . . mustache, an' his head didn't come clear off, first time I hit him. I, mind me— Why, that

shis sissy of ours has departed! Whasha matter with him? Don't he like our company? I shwear I'll cut his legs off!"

He grimaced fiercely. Shea ignored him and went over to comfort Belphebe. He put an arm around her shaking shoulders and said: "There, there."

She seemed to feel a little better when she had drunk some of the brandy.

"Nay, spare your remarks," she said. "No woman likes to be told her folly."

"I wasn't going to remark anything," said Shea.

"Then the more fool you. Know you that tag in the Latin tongue *In vino veritas?* Which is to say that the truth of a man lies oft at the bottom of a wine cup. Yet, I do shudder when I think I might have wedded with him—and found in some harem how light a mind lay beneath that fair exterior."

"Maybe he isn't always as bad as that," said Shea, magnanimously.

"Nay, excuse him not. 'Twas enough and double enough that he did so behave a single time. I'm well quit of the wittold, and again in your debt for the chance of seeing him through, before the clock struck too late"—she arched her eyebrows at him—"though I misdoubt you did it with so much in mind."

For the life of him Shea could not help looking sheepish.

"Hear me, my friend. It is a service and I thank you for it, since few women can resist the appeal of such a man, who seems weak enough to need their aid. Yet, if you did it with any thought, you might be his heritor, I fear you'll be disappointed. Heigh-ho! I'll have no more with men, forever and a day."

"Then you're going to leave—"

"—Save such as will be friends and no more, Sir Harold." She patted his arm.

XII.

They came down a hill toward Pau through the morning light. "I suppose we could get some horses there," remarked Shea, gazing at the thatched roofs. "Have you got any money, Belphebe? I gave the last I had to that hermit for the ass Medoro took."

She laughed. "Not a stiver. What would I with money?"

Shea looked at Roger. "Willingly would I ride," said the latter. "This halter irks me, and you shall pay dear for it one day. But money have I none. Why not make some, Sir Magician, as my Uncle Atlantès does when he's in need?"

Belphebe was looking at Shea expectantly. "I suppose I could try," he agreed. A few hundred yards back along their path was a place where a bank had caved to reveal a deposit of fine golden sand. He scooped up a double handful of this and put it into the money pouch that hung underneath his outer garment. He laid the pouch on the ground and traced a pair of interlacing pentagons like those on Atlantès' doors around it, while he tried to think of a suitable spell. He felt Belphebe's eyes upon him and it disturbed him slightly.

"Take this guy a little ways away and cover him, will you?" he asked. "Don't let him watch."

The spell was coming. Shea chanted, with symbolic gestures:

"Iron's for the soldier, silver for the maid,
Copper for the craftsman working at his trade.
Sand is but silly stuff, sifting to a fall;
Be gold, red gold! The master of them all!"

The money bag sagged and looked lumpy. Shea picked it up and heard a gratifying clink within. "All right," he called, "I guess we're set now."

Most of the men of Pau were working in their thin fields, distant along the mountain slopes. A woman directed them to the end of the village street, where a swarthy blacksmith received them across his anvil and admitted he might have horses to sell.

"How much?" asked Shea.

"Ten bezants. Though for the beautiful lady I will make a special price. You shall have one for her for eight."

"I'll take them." The smith looked startled at this easy acquiescence to his price. "By the way," Shea added, "if anyone comes through behind, asking if you saw three people like us, it might be a good idea not to remember."

The smith nodded and winked an enormous wink. Shea laid a handful of bright gold pieces on the anvil before him. As they touched the iron the gold pieces changed to little pinches of sand. The smith looked startled. Shea hastily reached into the money bag for more.

But the man's suspicions were fully aroused. He rang each piece on the anvil, or tried to, for as soon as metal touched metal, these too changed to little pinches of sand.

"Scoundrel! Cheat!" roared the man. He raised his hammer in a pair of brawny hands. "So you'd trick the smith of Pau, eh, with your fine manners and false coin? Begone! And think yourself lucky I cry not the haro after you!"

As THEY trudged sadly up the hill out of Pau, Shea remembered too late the source of the rhyme he had used for a spell. It was Kipling's poem, of course, in which iron is declared to be always the master of gold. Of course, the iron anvil would have the effect of destroying his magic. He felt melancholy, but was startled from his bitter reflections by a whine from the side of the road.

A huge gray dog was slinking through the trees parallel with their track.

"Wolf!" cried Belphebe. In a single, whirling flash of motion, she strung her bow, nocked an arrow, and let it drive. It hit the animal amidships, but instead of penetrating, bounced high in the air. Belphebe reached for another, but Shea cried:

"Wait a minute! Don't shoot again; I think I know that wolf" He called: "Are you Vaclav Polacek?"

The wolf nodded vigorously and bounded toward them. It frisked around the three, whining and howling.

"What's the matter?" said Shea. "Try another spell and get turned into a werewolf again?" Again the wolf nodded, bouncing up and down. Shea explained to Belphebe.

Toward evening, when it came time to provide dinner again, the wolf trotted off with her. It proved a skilled hunter, flushing game rapidly for her bow. She came back with five rabbits, two quail, and a partridge. It looked like a lot for three people, but the wolf ate everything that was left over. Shea was also gratified to note that Roger had a healthy respect for the animal. The perfect cavalier was much quieter than he had been.

By the next day they had reached the fork of the roads and were on the last lap of their journey. Afternoon found them ranging along a narrow valley where rank grass shot up among big stones. The wolf, which found their pace slow, was alternately dropping back and ranging ahead. After one of these excursions it came tearing up, whining excitedly.

"What's the matter, old man?" asked Shea.

The wolf bounced stiff-legged, and tried to indicate the direction from which they had come. When Shea proved obtuse, it nipped the bagginess of his trousers and turned him around.

Well back, a column of dust rose from the track behind them. There seemed to be heads moving beneath. Belphebe shaded her eyes, then gave a little squeal. "'Tis Medoro and the Saracens! And mounted!"

"He must have gone over the pass and picked up a party looking for us, and that damned smith put him on our track," said Shea.

"Ho!" said Roger. "And now 'twill be my pleasure to see you unbelieving dogs get your desserts.

"You'll get yours, too, if I know Medoro," snapped Shea. "But what'll we do?"

"Up yonder shoulder of the hill!" cried Belphebe. "They cannot reach us mounted there, and mayhap we shall gain the shelter of that timber."

Shea prodded Roger, but the big man hung back, laughing defiance. He would not move till the wolf growled at his heels. Then he climbed quickly enough.

THE HORSEMEN were coming on fast in a cloud of dust, about twenty of them. Yells announced that they had seen the party as it scrambled upward.

Shea and his companions reached the round of the shoulder, and panted through a clump of small oaks. Behind, a high wall of crumbled shale towered over them. They sank in this stuff, halfway to their knees. Every effort to climb loosened a minor landslide that carried them back down. Again and again they tried, but it was like a treadmill.

Below, a couple of horsemen were picking their way through the rocks at the base of the shoulder; others spread left and right. An arrow plunked

into the shale above Shea's head, starting another slip. Shea wished he knew some lethal magic.

"No use," he said, bitterly. "We'll have to fight for it." He hauled Roger into the clump of trees, and tied him to one.

The Saracens were skirmishing around the base of the shoulder, whooping. Arrows came whistling among the trees. Medoro sat on a fine white mount, well out of range.

Belphebe crouched behind a rock and let off an arrow at a dodging shape. It missed, splintering on a stone behind. The next hit a horse, which reared and threw its rider. Belphebe ducked as half a dozen shafts clattered around her.

"No shooting!" Medoro's voice came clear. "Take the woman alive, and five thousand bezants for the head of the man!"

A man threw up his arms and rolled out of the saddle, an arrow through his body. The rest drew out of range and dismounted. They spread out and ran at the base of the shoulder with swords and spears.

Shea had not missed the wolf that was Polacek until he saw the big gray shape slip out from among the stones and leap to a Saracen back. The man fell, screaming horribly in a voice that suddenly choked. Belphebe's bowstring began to snap.

Thump! Down went one of the attackers, clutching his stomach and chewing the grass. An arrow struck and hung in the chain mail of another, but he came right on unhurt. *Thump!* Down went the leading Saracen.

"Ten thousand bezants for the head of the infidel!" screamed Medoro.

A Saracen stopped with an arrow through his forearm. The others set up a yell of "God is great! God is great!" and came rushing and stumbling up from all sides, climbing over the bodies of those who stopped Belphebe's arrows. The wolf got the hindmost, and wolf and Saracen together rolled down the hill. Belphebe nailed him of the chain mail straight through the eye with an arrow. Down he went with a jingle and crash, just as the pack reached them.

"My last shaft, Harold," cried the girl.

Smart girl, he thought, to plant it where it did the most good. He swung. The yelling face before him split. He swung again. The next man had a helmet, which took the blow with a clang. Shea's blade snapped off at the handle. The man went over backward, stunned, and carried the legs from under a couple of others.

Someone behind hurled a javelin at Shea just as he recovered from the stroke. The javelin missed and hung quivering in a tree. Shea and Belphebe grabbed for it together. He reached it first, wrenched it loose, snapped it over his knee, and gripped the half with the point like a rapier. The Saracens were closing fast. Shea feinted at the nearest, dodged his return stroke, and lunged. The point went through the man's throat.

The next man gave ground, and Shea's lunge fell short. He leaped back, barely parrying a cut from the side. They were ringing him. He couldn't face three ways at once. A blow on the head made his senses spin; only his turban kept the edge out.

THEN a sound drowned the shouts of the Saracens; a blast on a horn, deep, full, resonant. It was a sound like the horn of Heimdall, that seemed to make the mountains shake. But this one had a wild, discordant edge that made Shea's skin crawl and his teeth ache. A dreadful feeling of fear and horror seized him; he wanted to burst into tears, to get down on his knees. The horn sounded again. All at once the Saracens were bounding down the shoulder and flipping into the saddles of their galloping horses. Shea almost ran after them.

A shadow floated across the shoulder and he looked up. Duke Astolph on his hippogriff soared past. He was outlined against the sky as he lifted the bugle to his lips and blew again, pursuing the Saracens down the valley.

But not all of them. Shea looked around just in time to see his old friend, the deaf, one-eyed drillmaster. He was drawing a double-curved bow, not twenty yards away. Shea ducked instinctively as the man released the shaft. The arrow went over his head.

A cry made him look around. Belphebe had reached for a dropped scimitar. Now she was just sinking to her knees, the arrow sticking in her side.

Shea hurled himself at the drillmaster. The man dropped the bow and whipped out a yataghan. For three seconds their weapons flickered like sunbeams. Shea parried like lightning and drove the javelin point into the fel-

low's forearm. It stuck between the bones. The man dropped his weapon and pulled back, tearing the javelin from Shea's hand.

Shea snatched up the yataghan. One-eye dropped to his knees. "Mercy!" he yelled. "You wouldn't strike an unarmed man?"

"Damn right I would," snarled Shea, and struck. The fellow's head flew, bounced, bounced again, and rolled down the hill, coming to rest upside down against a rock. "Well struck, Sir Magician!" boomed Roger's voice.

Shea went back to where Belphebe lay among the rocks. Her face was pale and her eyes half-closed. She opened them as he took her in his arms.

"Harold," she said.

"Yes, dearest."

"I love you. I know it now."

"I love you, too."

"I would have married you and borne your sons. 'Twould have been a brave match."

"Is it as bad as that?"

"Aye. I fear me. I am going to Ceres and Silvanus. Kiss me before I go."

He kissed her. He bent his head and listened for her heart. It was beating slowly and weakly.

She sighed a little. "A brave match—"

"What-ho!" said a familiar deep voice. Astolph stood over them, the bugle in one hand, the hippogriff's bridle in the other. "I say, is the young lady hurt? That's a bit of too bad. Let me have a look at her."

He glanced at the projecting arrow. "Let's see the pulse. Heart still going, but not for long. Internal bleeding, that's the devil. Quick, young fellow, get me some twigs and grass and start a fire. I can handle this, I think, but we'll have to move fast."

Shea scrambled around. He cursed the slow inefficiency of flint and steel, but finally got the fire going.

Astolph had whipped together a tiny simulacrum of an arrow out of a twig, with a bunch of grass representing the feathers. He burned this, muttering a spell. He spat. He chanted. He waved his hands. The smoke billowed round, two or three times as much as the fire had any right to make. It hid him and Belphebe. Through it Shea could just make out that the duke was erect, his arms spread wide, shouting and chanting in several languages.

Suddenly the fire went out. The smoke died. Astolph stood by the ashes, big beads of perspiration on his face. "A bit of warm work, that," he said.

Belphebe sat up and smiled. The arrow was gone, and there was no trace of where it had pierced her tunic save a big bloodstain down the side.

"I'd jolly well like to fix that for you," remarked Astolph, "but I'm not exactly a magic laundryman, you know. By the by, you could stand a bit of leeching yourself, Sir Harold."

SHEA realized that he had been wounded. There was blood on his face from the blow which his turban had kept from breaking his skull, a cut on one arm, and another on the thigh. All responded readily enough to Astolph's magic.

Shea thanked him, and asked: "How'd you happen along so opportunely?"

"I was looking for you. My magic told me Roger'd left Agramant's camp, and I suspected you'd got him. Close thing, what?" His blue eyes peered down the valley, along which a little knot of wounded Saracens was hobbling and crawling. "Next time I see that chap on a white horse, the one who was leading his men so bravely from the rear, I'll turn him into a rabbit. Should be easy. Hullo, what's this?"

The wolf had untangled itself from one of the bodies that littered the hill, and crawled slowly up the slope. Astolph cried: "A werewolf, as I live!"

Shea explained. Astolph changed the wolf into Vaclav Polacek. The Rubber Czech felt his throat. "That guy nearly strangled me," he croaked huskily, "but I got him. And my ribs are sore where your girl friend plunked me with that arrow, Harold. Boy, when that thing hit me I sure was glad I was the kind of wolf it takes silver to hurt."

"But how'd you get in that odd shape?" demanded Astolph. "I know enough magic to be sure lycanthropy isn't a habit with you."

Polacek smiled with embarrassment. "I got fed up with walking, and I tried to turn myself into an eagle so I could look for Roger better. But all I did was come out another wolf. I guess I made another mistake."

He looked so full of innocent contrition that Shea could not bawl him out properly. Shea merely said: "You'll try a half-baked experiment once too often, and we'll have a canceled Czech on our hands. What's it like, being a werewolf?"

Polacek brightened. "Not so bad. It would be a nuisance in town, though. I had the most horrible craving for human flesh; it was all I could do to control it. You never knew how close you came to being eaten while you were asleep last night, Harold."

"Glup," said Shea.

"You were speaking of Roger, I believe," said Astolph. "I daresay you have him around here somewhere. Ah, yes, there he is. I'll just take charge of him, if you don't mind."

"Sorry, but I do mind," said Shea. "I agreed to deliver him to Castle Carena so Atlantès'll let Doc Chalmers and his girl friend out."

"I say, you can't do that!"

"What makes you think I can't?" demanded Shea. He had picked up Belphebe's bow. Now he plucked an arrow from one of the stiffs. He quickly drew the bow, not on Astolph, but on Roger. "One false move or one bit of magic, Mr. Astolph, and I'll plug him!"

"Look here, fair play's a jewel. After all I did for you and the young lady, it . . . it simply isn't done, you know!"

"I'm really very sorry. Honest. But I promised Doc Chalmers long before this came up. You'll get plenty more cracks at Roger. But if I don't get him back there, Atlantès is likely to melt Florimel up and sprinkle the lawn with her."

"How do you know he won't do that in any case? He's a tricky bounder."

"There's something in that, all right. Tell you what! You and he are both pretty good magicians. Suppose we hold a contest and the one who changes Florimel into a person gets Roger."

Astolph tried to appeal to Shea's better nature again, but the latter stood firm.

"At least," said Astolph finally, "you might let me have charge of him temporarily, till we hold the contest. You can't go on hauling him around with a halter like a bloody sheep, you know."

"Oh, yes we can," Shea grinned. "Of course we don't mistrust you. But it's just a sensible precaution—like that sleeping-spell you tried to put on me."

XIII.

THEY had all been at the edge of exhaustion before. Astolph's curative magic revived them so that they made the remaining five miles without difficulty. Shea insisted on Astolph's taking the lead, where he could be watched. He himself led Roger, who became more morose at every step. Belphebe followed with ready bow, and Polacek with a scimitar picked up from one of the corpses.

As they climbed the long hill on which the Castle of Iron stood within its ring of soundless flame, Astolph turned to Shea. "Does the bargain hold good if the transformation's carried out by another magician I call in?" he asked.

"Sure."

"Righto. I'm not so sure I can do it myself, but I jolly well know who can." He dismounted from the hippogriff. "Hang onto Buttercup for just a bit, will you, old thing?" And he vanished.

"You go through there and tell Atlantès the conditions, Volsy," said Shea. "No, wait a minute. You cover Roger with the bow. I've got some unfinished business to see to." He started for Belphebe with his arms out. She threw herself into them.

"Break it up, will you?" said Polacek after five minutes. "I can't hold this thing cocked forever."

Half an hour later the fire flickered blue, then died out altogether. Polacek led Chalmers, Atlantès, and Florimel through the line where it had been.

Chalmers said: "Goodness gracious, Harold, you're all bloody! I hope you're not hurt?"

Atlantès bowed to the ground. "Greetings, Sir Harold! A noble quest, heroically fulfilled. You have earned my endless gratitude. Ah, Roger, Roger, such a youth!" He shook his finger and Roger ground his teeth.

"But, surely," he turned to Shea again, "you did but jest when you sent your noble colleague to me with so hard conditions for the young man's release?"

"Not at all," said Shea. "If you want to see him full of arrows, just try to get around them."

"And 'twould be my delight to place the arrows at the tenderest spots," added Belphebe, her face set. "Do you recall why I was wrenched hither from my own place?"

"By the toenails of the Prophet, 'tis the archeress!" cried Atlantès. "Ah, gracious lady, if you but—"

"Peace, uncle," said Roger. "I fear not this she-devil's shafts nor death in any other form, if you'll but cease this babbling and make some decision. A murrain on such talk! I could have killed fifty men while you stand here debating whether one shall die. And these bonds chafe me to madness."

Atlantès said: "Ah, noble youth. Like a haltered eagle. Could you not—"

"No," said Shea.

There was a swirl of air and a whoosh. It was Astolph returning. With him was a man as tall as himself; a man with a long white beard, neatly combed, and a mane of white hair. He was dressed with formidable correctness in cutaway, pin-striped pants, and spats. A top hat sat at a rakish angle on his head. He even had a flower in his buttonhole.

"Permit me," said Astolph, "to present the Honorable Ambrose Sylvester Merlin, C. M. G., C. S. I., D. M. D., F. I. C., F. R. G. S., F. R. S. L., F. S. A., and a couple of et ceteras.

"Foul!" yelped Atlantès. "'Twas to be a contest of magician against magician, not one against two!"

"Don't worry, old thing," said Astolph calmly. "I'll leave the whole matter to my friend here. I'll vanish if you like, or turn myself into some sort of plant as a guarantee of good faith."

"But—" shrieked Atlantès, waving his fists.

"Do you want a chance at Roger or don't you?" said Shea.

Atlantès subsided. "Sir Harold, your conditions are hard. I don't blame you, you understand, oh, not a jot I. But since you wish it, I'll enchant this Florimel for you." He whipped out a wand and traced a circle on the ground around himself. Merlin did likewise. They both began to incant. Merlin's language was full of voiceless l's; Shea guessed it must be old Welsh. Atlantès' sounded even stranger; it might be Aramaic or Syrian.

A MIST condensed out of the air around the two enchanters, growing and growing, enshrouding the spectators till they could not see each other. The evening sun was only a dim red blob through it. Faint and fitful lights marked the positions of the enchanters' circles: Merlin's yellow, Atlantès' green. The air was filled with rustlings.

The mist thinned and vanished.

Where Florimel had stood, there were two Florimels, identical in dress, poise, and appearance.

Merlin calmly slipped his wand in his pocket and stepped up to one of the girls. "This one's mine, the real one. Are you not, my dear?" He lifted his plug hat courteously.

"Aye, good sir." She gave a little squeak of pleasure. "Ah, 'tis real blood flows through my veins. I feel it!"

Merlin held out a finger. A yellow flame appeared at the tip. He held up Florimel's arm and ran the flame quickly along beneath it. "Observe. No more reaction than any other normal person's." He blew the flame out. "The other's a sham of some sort. Must be off, Astolph. That numismatic exhibition, you know."

"Cheerio, Merlin," said Astolph, "and thanks." Merlin vanished.

"Sham!" screamed Atlantès, clawing at air. "Here is the true Florimel, the other's but a phantom! Fetch fire!"

Shea noted that Chalmers was making rapid passes with his hands. He turned to the duplicate Florimel, who was blinking as if just awakened. "What's your real name, young lady?"

The girl put one finger in her mouth. "Cassiodora, sir," she began a curtsy, but broke it off to stare in amazement at her clothes. "O-o-oh! Ain't that pretty?"

"Hey!" said Polacek. "That's the name of the daughter of a farmer who lives down the line, near Pau!"

"To be sure, sir," giggled the girl. "And you're the young gentleman who—"

"Never mind," said Polacek hastily. "She's a ringer, but it's O. K. with me. Doc can have his Florimel, and I'll take this one. I always thought I'd make a good traveling salesman."

"Oh, sir!" The girl tittered. "A great noble lord like you to take poor little me!"

Astolph reached for Roger's halter, to which Shea still clung. "I take it I get the young man, what?"

"By Hassan and Hossein, no!" shouted Atlantès. "You restored her 'Tis uncovenanted—"

"But, see here, old man, that was part of the—"

"Nay! A most vile palpable swindle!"

"I appeal to you, Sir Harold."

Shea released the halter. "You have possession, Astolph. I think it's up to you to keep it. Hey, everybody, we better get going. I think there's going to be fireworks."

THE THREE psychologists and their ladies turned their backs on the disputants. They had not gone fifty paces when there was a crack like a cannon shot. One of the magicians had thrown a thunderbolt at the other.

"Hurry!" said Chalmers. They ran. Crack followed crack, merging into

a frightful thunder. The earth began to quiver beneath their feet; a boulder came loose and lolloped down the hillside past them.

"Run!" yelled Shea, gripping Belphebe's hand.

As they ran they glanced back over their shoulders. The Castle of Iron was hidden by a huge boiling thunderhead, soaring up and up. The base of the cloud flickered and roared with lightnings. A piece of the mountainside heaved itself loose and rolled downward. They ran till they were out of breath, hearing behind them through the now-distant thunders the faint, tearing notes of Astolph's bugle horn.

"Whew!" said Reed Chalmers, mopping his brow. "I . . uh perceive further rejuvenation is necessary before any further indulgence in athletics. I should mention, by the way, Harold, why Atlantès was so interested in detaining me there. He is rather second-rate as a magician, and wished to learn more of the theory from me. He did, however, know something about inter-universal apportation. Apparently he had friends among the Enchanters' Chapter of Faerie. That's how he heard about me uh . and about Belphebe, for that matter. He brought her here without attuning her mind to inter-universal travel and—"

"Good Lord!" cried Shea, "I'd forgotten!"

"Forgotten what?" asked Polacek.

"I bet Walter Bayard's been eating honey for a week—and he doesn't like it!"

A grin spread across the face of the Rubber Czech. "That isn't all," he remarked. "Remember how long we were in Xanadu? It was hours, though it couldn't have taken Doc more than a few minutes to find out he'd made a mistake."

"Goodness gracious!" said Chalmers. "Then Walter has been there a month or more. I must certainly address myself to the problem."

THE END.

THEY

by ROBERT HEINLEIN

● He didn't believe this world was logically credible. Well—do you?

THEY would not let him alone.

They never would let him alone. He realized that that was part of the plot against him—never to leave him in peace, never to give him a chance to mull over the lies they had told him, time enough to pick out the flaws, and to figure out the truth for himself.

That damned attendant this morning! He had come busting in with his breakfast tray, waking him, and causing him to forget his dream. If only he could remember that dream—

Someone was unlocking the door. He ignored it.

"Howdy, old boy. They tell me you refused your breakfast?" Dr. Hayward's professionally kindly mask hung over his bed.

"I wasn't hungry."

"But we can't have that. You'll get weak, and then I won't be able to get you well completely. Now get up and get your clothes on and I'll order an eggnog for you. Come on, that's a good fellow!"

Unwilling, but still less willing at that moment to enter into any conflict of wills, he got out of bed and slipped on his bathrobe. "That's better," Hayward approved. "Have a cigarette?"

"No, thank you."

The doctor shook his head in a puzzled fashion. "Darned if I can figure you out. Loss of interest in physical pleasures does not fit your type of case."

"What is my type of case?" he inquired in flat tones.

"Tut! Tut!" Hayward tried to appear roguish. "If medicos told their professional secrets, they might have to work for a living."

"What is my type of case?"

"Well—the label doesn't matter, does it? Suppose *you* tell me. I really know nothing about your case as yet. Don't you think it is about time you talked?"

"I'll play chess with you."

"All right, all right." Hayward made a gesture of impatient concession. "We've played chess every day for a week. If you will talk, I'll play chess."

What could it matter? If he was right, they already understood perfectly that he had discovered their plot; there was nothing to be gained by concealing the obvious. Let them try to argue him out of it. Let the tail go with the hide! To hell with it!

He got out the chessmen and commenced setting them up. "What do you know of my case so far?"

"Very little. Physical examination, negative. Past history, negative. High intelligence, as shown by your record in school and your success in your profession. Occasional fits of moodiness, but nothing exceptional. The only positive information was the incident that caused you to come here for treatment."

"To be brought here, you mean. Why should it cause comment?"

"Well, good gracious, man—if you barricade yourself in your room and insist that your wife is plotting against

you, don't you expect people to notice?"

"But she *was* plotting against me—and so are you. White, or black?"

"Black—it's your turn to attack. Why do you think we are 'plotting against you'?"

"It's an involved story, and goes way back into my early childhood. There was an immediate incident, however—" He opened by advancing the white king's knight to KB3. Hayward's eyebrows raised.

"You make a piano attack?"

"Why not? You know that it is not safe for me to risk a gambit with you."

THE DOCTOR shrugged his shoulders and answered the opening. "Suppose we start with your early childhood. It may shed more light than more recent incidents. Did you feel that you were being persecuted as a child?"

"No!" He half rose from his chair. "When I was a child I was sure of myself. I knew then, I tell you; I knew! Life was worth while, and I knew it. I was at peace with myself and my surroundings. Life was good and I was good, and I assumed that the creatures around me were like myself."

"And weren't they?"

"Not at all! Particularly the children. I didn't know what viciousness was until I was turned loose with other 'children.' The little devils! And I was expected to be like them and play with them."

The doctor nodded. "I know. The herd compulsion. Children can be pretty savage at times."

"You've missed the point. This wasn't any healthy roughness: these creatures were *different*—not like myself at all. They *looked* like me, but they were *not* like me. If I tried to say anything to one of them about anything that mattered to me, all I could get was a stare and a scornful laugh. Then they would find some way to punish me for having said it."

Hayward nodded. "I see what you mean. How about grown-ups?"

"That is somewhat different. Adults don't matter to children at first—or, rather, they did not matter to me. They were too big, and they did not bother me, and they were busy with things that did not enter into my considerations. It was only when I noticed that my presence affected them that I began to wonder about them."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, they never did the things when I was around that they did when I was not around."

Hayward looked at him carefully. "Won't that statement take quite a lot of justifying? How do you know what they did when you weren't around?"

He acknowledged the point. "But I used to catch them just stopping. If I came into a room, the conversation would stop suddenly, and then it would pick up about the weather or something equally inane. Then I took to hiding and listening and looking. Adults did not behave the same way in my presence as out of it."

"Your move, I believe. But see here, old man—that was when you were a child. Every child passes through that phase. Now that you are a man, you must see the adult point of view. Children *are* strange creatures and have to be protected—at least, we do protect them—from many adult interests. There is a whole code of conventions in the matter that—"

"Yes, yes," he interrupted impatiently, "I know all that. Nevertheless, I noticed enough and remembered enough that was never clear to me later.

And it put me on my guard to notice the next thing."

"Which was?" He noticed that the doctor's eyes were averted as he adjusted a castle's position.

"The things I saw people doing and heard them talking about were never of any importance. They *must* be doing something else."

"I don't follow you."

"You don't choose to follow me. I'm telling this to you in exchange for a game of chess."

"Why do you like to play chess so well?"

"Because it is the only thing in the world where I can see all the factors and understand all the rules. Never mind—I saw all around me this enormous plant, cities, farms, factories, churches, schools, homes, railroads, luggage, roller coasters, trees, saxophones, libraries, people and animals. People that looked like me and who should have felt very much like me, if what I was told was the truth. But what did they appear to be doing? 'They went to work to earn the money to buy the food to get the strength to go to work to earn the money to buy the food to get the strength to go to work to get the strength to buy the food to earn the money to go to—' until they fell over dead. Any slight variation in the basic pattern did not matter, for they always fell over dead. And everybody tried to tell me that I should be doing the same thing. I knew better!"

THE DOCTOR gave him a look apparently intended to denote helpless surrender and laughed. "I can't argue with you. Life does look like that, and maybe it is just that futile. But it is the only life we have. Why not make up your mind to enjoy it as much as possible?"

"Oh, no!" He looked both sulky and stubborn. "You can't peddle nonsense to me by claiming to be fresh out of sense. How do I know? Because all this complex stage setting, all these swarms of actors, could not have been put here just to make idiot noises at each other. Some other explanation, but not that one. An insanity as enormous, as complex, as the one around me had to be planned. I've found the plan!"

"Which is?"

He noticed that the doctor's eyes were again averted.

"It is a play intended to divert me, to occupy my mind and confuse me, to keep me so busy with details that I will not have time to think about the meaning. You are all in it, every one of you." He shook his finger in the doctor's face. "Most of them may be helpless automatons, but you're not. You are one of the conspirators. You've been sent in as a troubleshooter to try to force me to go back to playing the role assigned to me!"

He saw that the doctor was waiting for him to quiet down.

"Take it easy," Hayward finally managed to say. "Maybe it is all a conspiracy, but why do you think that you have been singled out for special attention? Maybe it is a joke on all of us. Why couldn't I be one of the victims as well as yourself?"

"Got you!" He pointed a long finger at Hayward. "That is the essence of the plot. All of these creatures have been set up to look like me in order to prevent me from realizing that I was the center of the arrangements. But I have noticed the key fact, the mathematically inescapable fact, that I am unique. Here am I, sitting on the inside. The

world extends outward from me. I am the center—"

"Easy, man, easy! Don't you realize that the world looks that way to me, too. We are each the center of the universe—"

"Not so! That is what you have tried to make me believe, that I am just one of millions more just like me. Wrong! If they were like me, then I could get into communication with them. I can't. I have tried and tried and I can't. I've sent out my inner thoughts, seeking some one other being who has them, too. What have I gotten back? Wrong answers, jarring incongruities, meaningless obscenity. I've tried, I tell you. God!—how I've tried! But there is nothing out there to speak to me—nothing but emptiness and otherness!"

"Wait a minute. Do you mean to say that you think there is nobody home at my end of the line? Don't you believe that I am alive and conscious?"

He regarded the doctor soberly. "Yes, I think you are probably alive, but you are one of the others—my antagonists. But you have set thousands of others around me whose faces are blank, not *lived in*, and whose speech is a meaningless reflex of noise."

"Well, then, if you concede that I am an ego, why do you insist that I am so very different from yourself?"

"Why? Wait!" He pushed back from the chess table and strode over to the wardrobe, from which he took out a violin case.

WHILE he was playing, the lines of suffering smoothed out of his face and his expression took a relaxed beatitude. For a while he recaptured the emotions, but not the knowledge, which he had possessed in dreams. The melody proceeded easily from proposition to proposition with inescapable, unforced logic. He finished with a triumphant statement of the essential thesis and turned to the doctor. "Well?"

"Hm-m-m." He seemed to detect an even greater degree of caution in the doctor's manner. "It's an odd bit, but remarkable. 'Spity you didn't take up the violin seriously. You could have made quite a reputation. You could even now. Why don't you do it? You could afford to, I believe.

He stood and stared at the doctor for a long moment, then shook his head as if trying to clear it. "It's no use," he said slowly, "no use at all. There is no possibility of communication. I am alone." He replaced the instrument in its case and returned to the chess table. "My move, I believe?"

"Yes. Guard your queen."

He studied the board. "Not necessary. I no longer need my queen. Check."

The doctor interposed a pawn to parry the attack.

He nodded. "You use your pawns well, but I have learned to anticipate your play. Check again—and mate, I think."

The doctor examined the new situation. "No," he decided, "no—not quite." He retreated from the square under attack. "Not checkmate—stalemate at the worst. Yes, another stalemate."

HE WAS UPSET by the doctor's visit. He *couldn't* be wrong, basically, yet the doctor had certainly pointed out logical holes in his position. From a logical standpoint the whole world might be a fraud perpetrated on everybody. But logic meant nothing—logic itself was a fraud, starting with un-

proved assumptions and capable of proving anything. The world is what it is!—and carries its own evidence of trickery.

But does it? What did he have to go on? Could he lay down a line between known facts and everything else and then make a reasonable interpretation of the world, based on facts alone—an interpretation free from complexities of logic and no hidden assumptions of points not certain. Very well—

First fact, himself. He knew himself directly. He existed.

Second facts, the evidence of his "five senses," everything that he himself saw and heard and smelled and tasted with his physical senses. Subject to their limitations, he must believe his senses. Without them he was entirely solitary, shut up in a locker of bone, blind, deaf, cutoff, the only being in the world.

And that was not the case. He knew that he did not *invent* the information brought to him by his senses. There had to be something else out there, some *otherness* that produced the things his senses recorded. All philosophies that claim that the physical world around him did not exist except in his imagination were sheer nonsense.

But beyond that, what? Were there any third facts on which he could rely? No, not at this point. He could not afford to believe anything that he was told, or that he read, or that was implicitly assumed to be true about the world around him. No, he could not believe any of it, for the sum total of what he had been told and read and been taught in school was so contradictory, so senseless, so wildly insane that none of it could be believed unless he personally confirmed it.

Wait a minute— The very telling of these lies, these senseless contradictions, was a fact in itself, known to him directly. To that extent they were data, probably very important data.

The world as it had been shown to him was a piece of unreason, an idiot's dream. Yet it was on too mammoth a scale to be without some reason. He came wearily back to his original point: Since the world could not be as crazy as it appeared to be, it must necessarily have been arranged to appear crazy in order to deceive him as to the truth.

Why had they done it to him? And what was the truth behind the sham? There must be some clue in the deception itself. What thread ran through it all? Well, in the first place he had been given a superabundance of explanations of the world around him, philosophies, religions, "common sense" explanations. Most of them were so clumsy, so obviously inadequate, or meaningless, that they could hardly have expected him to take them seriously. They must have intended them simply as misdirection.

But there were certain basic assumptions running through all the hundreds of explanations of the craziness around him. It must be these basic assumptions that he was expected to believe. For example, there was the deep-seated assumption that he was a "human being," essentially like millions of others around him and billions more in the past and the future.

That was nonsense! He had never once managed to get into real communication with all those *things* that looked so much like him but were so different. In the agony of his loneliness, he had deceived himself that Alice understood him and was a being like him. He knew now that he had suppressed and refused to examine thou-

sands of little discrepancies because he could not bear the thought of returning to complete loneliness. He had needed to believe that his wife was a living, breathing being of his own kind who understood his inner thoughts. He had refused to consider the possibility that she was simply a mirror, an echo—or something unthinkably worse.

He had found a mate, and the world was tolerable, even though dull, stupid, and full of petty annoyance. He was moderately happy and had put away his suspicions. He had accepted, quite docilely, the treadmill he was expected to use, until a slight mischance had momentarily cut through the fraud—then his suspicions had returned with impounded force; the bitter knowledge of his childhood had been confirmed.

He supposed that he had been a fool to make a fuss about it. If he had kept his mouth shut they would not have locked him up. He should have been as subtle and as shrewd as they; kept his eyes and ears open and learned the details of and the reasons for the plot against him. He might have learned how to circumvent it.

But what if they had locked him up—the whole world was an asylum and all of them his keepers.

A KEY scraped in the lock, and he looked up to see an attendant entering with a tray. "Here's your dinner, sir."

"Thanks, Joe," he said gently. "Just put it down."

"Movies tonight, sir," the attendant went on. "Wouldn't you like to go? Dr. Hayward said you could—"

"No, thank you. I prefer not to."

"I wish you would, sir." He noticed with amusement the persuasive intentness of the attendant's manner. "I think the doctor wants you to. It's a good movie. There's a Mickey Mouse cartoon—"

"You almost persuade me, Joe," he answered with passive agreeableness. "Mickey's trouble is the same as mine, essentially. However, I'm not going. They need not bother to hold movies tonight."

"Oh, there will be movies in any case, sir. Lots of our other guests will attend."

"Really? Is that an example of thoroughness, or are you simply keeping up the pretense in talking to me? It isn't necessary, Joe, if it's any strain on you. I *know* the game. If I don't attend, there is no point in holding movies."

He liked the grin with which the attendant answered this thrust. Was it possible that this being was created just as he appeared to be—big muscles, phlegmatic disposition, tolerant, doglike? Or was there nothing going on behind those kind eyes, nothing but robot reflex? No, it was more likely that he was one of them, since he was so closely in attendance on him.

The attendant left and he busied himself at his supper tray, scooping up the already-cut bites of meat with a spoon, the only implement provided. He smiled again at their caution and thoroughness. No danger of that—he would not destroy this body as long as it served him in investigating the truth of the matter. There were still many different avenues of research available before taking that possibly irrevocable step.

After supper he decided to put his thoughts in better order by writing them; he obtained paper. He should start with a general statement of some underlying postulate of the credos that had been drummed into him all his

"life." Life? Yes, that was a good one. He wrote:

I am told that I was born a certain number of years ago and that I will die a similar number of years hence. Various clumsy stories have been offered me to explain to me where I was before birth and what becomes of me after death, but they are rough lies, not intended to deceive, except as misdirection. In every other possible way the world around me assures me that I am mortal, here but a few years, and a few years hence gone completely—nonexistent.

WRONG—I am immortal. I transcend this little time axis; a seventy-year span on it is but a casual phase in my experience. Second only to the prime datum of my own existence is the emotionally convincing certainty of my own continuity. I may be a closed curve, but, closed or open, I neither have a beginning nor an end. Self-awareness is not relational; it is absolute, and cannot be reached to be destroyed, or created. Memory, however, being a relational aspect of consciousness, may be tampered with and possibly destroyed.

It is true that most religions which have been offered me teach immortality, but note the fashion in which they teach it. The surest way to lie convincingly is to tell the truth unconvincingly. They did not wish me to believe.

Caution: Why have they *tried* so hard to convince me that I am going to "die" in a few years? There must be a very important reason. I infer that they are preparing me for some sort of a major change. It may be crucially important for me to figure out their intentions about this—probably I have several years in which to reach a decision. Note: Avoid using the types of reasoning they have taught me.

THE ATTENDANT was back. "Your wife is here, sir."

"Tell her to go away."

"Please, sir—Dr. Hayward is most anxious that you should see her."

"Tell Dr. Hayward that I said that he is an excellent chess player."

"Yes, sir." The attendant waited for a moment. "Then you won't see her, sir?"

"No, I won't see her."

He wandered around the room for some minutes after the attendant had left, too distrait to return to his recapitulation. By and large they had played very decently with him since they had brought him here. He was glad that they had allowed him to have a room alone, and he certainly had more time free for contemplation than had ever been possible on the outside. To be sure, continuous effort to keep him busy and to distract him was made, but, by being stubborn, he was able to circumvent the rules and gain some hours each day for introspection.

But, damnation!—he did wish they would not persist in using Alice in their attempts to divert his thoughts. Although the intense terror and revulsion which she had inspired in him when he had first rediscovered the truth had now aged into a simple feeling of repugnance and distaste for her company, nevertheless it was emotionally upsetting to be reminded of her, to be forced into making decisions about her.

After all, she *had* been his wife for many years. Wife? What was a wife? Another soul like one's own, a complement, the other necessary pole to the couple, a sanctuary of understanding and sympathy in the boundless depths of aloneness. *That* was what he had thought, what he had needed to believe and had believed fiercely for years. The yearning need for companionship of his own kind had caused him to see himself reflected in those beautiful eyes and had made him quite uncritical of occasional incongruities in her responses.

He sighed. He felt that he had sloughed off most of the typed emo-

tional reactions which they had taught him by precept and example, but Alice had gotten under his skin, way under, and it still hurt. He had been happy—what if it had been a dope dream? They had given him an excellent, a beautiful mirror to play with—the more fool he to have looked behind it!

Wearily he turned back to his summing up.

The world is explained in either one of two ways; the common-sense way which says that the world is pretty much as it appears to be and that ordinary human conduct and motivations are reasonable, and the religio-mystic solution which states that the world is dream stuff, unreal, insubstantial, with reality somewhere beyond.

WRONG—both of them. The common-sense scheme has no sense to it of any sort. "Life is short and full of trouble. Man born of woman is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward. His days are few and they are numbered. All is vanity and vexation." Those quotations may be jumbled and incorrect, but that is a fair statement of the common sense world-is-as-it-seems in its only possible evaluation. In such a world, human striving is about as rational as the blind dartings of a moth against a light bulb. The "common-sense world" is a blind insanity, out of nowhere, going nowhere, to no purpose.

As for the other solution, it appears more rational on the surface, in that it rejects the utterly irrational world of common sense. But it is not a rational solution, it is simply a flight from reality of any sort, for it refuses to believe the results of the only available direct communication between the ego and the Outside. Certainly the "five senses" are poor-enough channels of communication, but they are the only channels.

He crumpled up the paper and flung himself from the chair. Order and logic were no good—his answer was right because it smelled right. But he still did not know all the answer. Why the grand scale to the deception, countless creatures, whole continents, an enormously involved and minutely detailed matrix of insane history, insane tradition, insane culture? Why bother with more than a cell and a strait jacket?

It must be, it had to be, because it was supremely important to deceive him completely, because a lesser deception would not do. Could it be that they dare not let him suspect his real identity no matter how difficult and involved the fraud?

He had to know. In some fashion he must get behind the deception and see what went on when he was not looking. He had had one glimpse; this time he must see the actual workings, catch the puppet masters in their manipulations.

Obviously the first step must be to escape from this asylum, but to do it so craftily that they would never see him, never catch up with him, not have a chance to set the stage before him. That would be hard to do. He must excel them in shrewdness and subtlety.

Once decided, he spent the rest of the evening in considering the means by which he might accomplish his purpose. It seemed almost impossible—he must get away without once being seen and remain in strict hiding. They must lose track of him completely in order that they would not know where to center their deceptions. That would mean going without food for several days. Very well—he could do it. He must not give them any warning by unusual action or manner.

The lights blinked twice. Docilely he got up and commenced preparations for bed. When the attendant looked through the peephole he was already in bed, with his face turned to the wall.

Gladness! Gladness everywhere! It was good to be with his own kind, to hear the music swelling out of every living thing, as it always had and al-

ways would—good to know that everything was living and aware of him, participating in him, as he participated in them. It was *good* to be, *good* to know the unity of many and the diversity of one. There had been one bad thought—the details escaped him—but it was gone—it had never *been;* there was no place for it.

THE EARLY-MORNING sounds from the adjacent ward penetrated the sleep-laden body which served him here and gradually recalled him to awareness of the hospital room. The transition was so gentle that he carried over full recollection of what he had been doing and why. He lay still, a gentle smile on his face, and savored the uncouth, but not unpleasant, languor of the body he wore. Strange that he had ever forgotten despite their tricks and stratagems. Well, now that he had recalled the key, he would quickly set things right in this odd place. He would call them in at once and announce the new order. It would be amusing to see old Glaroon's expression when he realized that the cycle had ended—

The click of the peephole and the rasp of the door being unlocked guillotined his line of thought. The morning attendant pushed briskly in with the breakfast tray and placed it on the tip table. "Morning, sir. Nice, bright day—want it in bed, or will you get up?"

Don't answer! Don't listen! Suppress this distraction! This is part of their plan— But it was too late, too late. He felt himself slipping, falling, wrenched from reality back into the fraud world in which they had kept him. It was gone, gone completely, with no single association around him to which to anchor memory. There was nothing left but the sense of heartbreaking loss and the acute ache of unsatisfied catharsis.

"Leave it where it is. I'll take care of it."

"Okey-doke." The attendant bustled out, slamming the door, and noisily locked it.

He lay quite still for a long time, every nerve end in his body screaming for relief.

At last he got out of bed, still miserably unhappy, and attempted to concentrate on his plans for escape. But the psychic wrench he had received in being recalled so suddenly from his plane of reality had left him bruised and emotionally disturbed. His mind insisted on rechewing its doubts, rather

than engage in constructive thought. Was it possible that the doctor was right, that he was not alone in his miserable dilemma? Was he really simply suffering from paranoia, delusions of self-importance?

Could it be that each unit in this yeasty swarm around him was the prison of another lonely ego—helpless, blind, and speechless, condemned to an eternity of miserable loneliness? Was the look of suffering which he had brought to Alice's face a true reflection of inner torment and not simply a piece of play-acting intended to maneuver him into compliance with their plans?

A KNOCK sounded at the door. He said "Come in," without looking up. Their comings and goings did not matter to him.

"Dearest—" A well-known spoke slowly and hesitantly.

"Alice!" He was on his feet at once, and facing her. "Who let you in here?"

"Please, dear, please— I had to see you."

"It isn't fair. It isn't fair." He spoke more to himself than to her. Then: "Why did you come?"

She stood up to him with a dignity he had hardly expected. The beauty of her childlike face had been marred by line and shadow, but it shone with an unexpected courage. "I love you," she answered quietly. "You can tell me to go away, but you can't make me stop loving you and trying to help you."

He turned away from her in an agony of indecision. Could it be possible that he had misjudged her? Was there, behind that barrier of flesh and sound symbols, a spirit that truly yearned toward his? Lovers whispering in the dark— "You *do* understand, don't you?"

"Yes, dear heart, I understand."

"Then nothing that happens to us can matter, as long as we are together and understand—" Words, words, rebounding hollowly from an unbroken wall—

No, he *couldn't* be wrong! Test her again— "Why did you keep me on that job in Omaha?"

"But I didn't make you keep that job. I simply pointed out that we should think twice before—"

"Never mind. Never mind." Soft hands and a sweet face preventing him with mild stubbornness from ever doing the thing that his heart told him to do. Always with the best of intentions, the best of intentions, but always so that he had never quite managed to do the silly, unreasonable things that *he* knew were worth while. Hurry, hurry, hurry, and strive, with an angel-faced jockey to see that you don't stop long enough to think for yourself—

"Why did you try to stop me from going back upstairs that day?"

She managed to smile, although her eyes were already spilling over with tears. "I didn't know it really mattered to you. I didn't want us to miss the train."

It had been a small thing, an unimportant thing. For some reason not clear even to him he had insisted on going back upstairs to his study when they were about to leave the house for a short vacation. It was raining, and she had pointed out that there was barely enough time to get to the station. He had surprised himself and her, too, by insisting on his own way in circumstances in which he had never been known to be stubborn.

He had actually pushed her to one side and forced his way up the stairs. Even then nothing might have come of

it had he not—quite unnecessarily—raised the shade of the window that faced toward the rear of the house.

It was a very small matter. It had been raining, hard, out in front. From this window the weather was clear and sunny, with no sign of rain.

He had stood there quite a long while, gazing out at the impossible sunshine and rearranging his cosmos in his mind. He re-examined long-suppressed doubts in the light of this one small but totally unexplainable discrepancy. Then he had turned and had found that she was standing behind him.

He had been trying ever since to forget the expression that he had surprised on her face.

"What about the rain?"

"The rain?" she repeated in a small, puzzled voice. "Why, it was raining, of course. What about it?"

"But it was *not* raining out my study window."

"What? But of course it was. I did notice the sun break through the clouds for a moment, but that was all."

"Nonsense!"

"But, darling, what has the weather to do with you and me? What difference does it make whether it rains or not—to us?" She approached him timidly and slid a small hand between his arm and side. "Am I responsible for the weather?"

"I think you are. Now please go."

She withdrew from him, brushed blindly at her eyes, gulped once, then said in a voice held steady: "All right. I'll go. But remember—you *can* come home if you want to. And I'll be there, if you want me." She waited a moment, then added hesitantly: "Would you would you kiss me good-by?"

He made no answer of any sort, neither with voice nor eyes. She looked at him, then turned, fumbled blindly for the door, and rushed through it.

THE CREATURE he knew as Alice went to the place of assembly without stopping to change form. "It is necessary to adjourn this sequence. I am no longer able to influence his decisions."

They had expected it, nevertheless they stirred with dismay.

The Glaroon addressed the First for Manipulation. "Prepare to graft the selected memory track at once."

Then, turning to the First for Operations, the Glaroon said: "The extrapolation shows that he will tend to escape within two of his days. This sequence degenerated primarily through your failure to extend that rainfall all around him. Be advised."

"It would be simpler if we understood his motives."

"In my capacity as Dr. Hayward, I have often thought so," commented the Glaroon acidly, "but if we understood his motives, we would be part of *him*. Bear in mind the Treaty! He almost remembered."

The creature known as Alice spoke up. "Could he not have the Taj Mahal next sequence? For some reason he values it."

"You are becoming assimilated!"

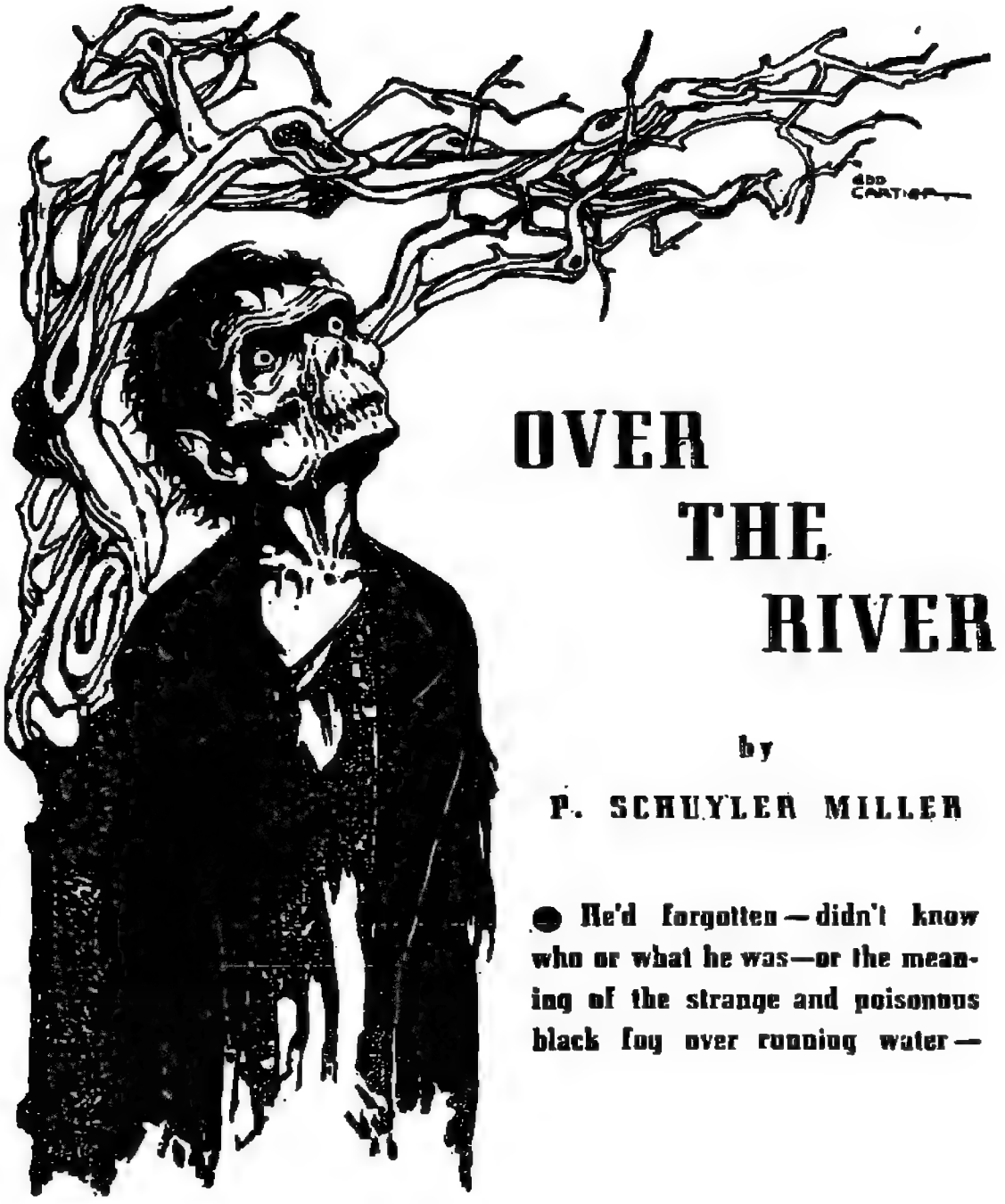
"Perhaps. I am not in fear. Will he receive it?"

"It will be considered."

The Glaroon continued with orders: "Leave structures standing until adjournment. New York City and Harvard University are now dismantled. Divert him from those sectors.

"Move!"

THE END.



OVER THE RIVER

by

P. SCHUYLER MILLER

He'd forgotten—didn't know who or what he was—or the meaning of the strange and poisonous black fog over running water—

THE shape of his body showed in the frozen mud, where he had lain face down under the fallen tree. His footprints were sharp in the melting snow, and his feet had left dark, wet blotches where he had climbed the rock. He had lain there for a long time. Long enough it was for time to have lost its meaning.

The moon was coming up over the nearer mountain, full and white, etched across with the pattern of naked branches. Its light fell on his upturned

face, on his sunken, brilliant eyes and the puffy blue of jowls on which the beard had started to grow, then stopped. It shone down on the world of trees and rocks of which he was a part, and gave it life.

The night was warm. In the valley the snow had long been gone. Flowers were pushing up through the moist earth; frogs were Pan-piping in every low spot; great trout stirred in the deep pools of the river. It was May, but on the mountain, under the north-facing ledges where the sun never came, the snow was still banked deep with an edge of blue ice, and needles of frost glistened in the black mud of the forest floor.

It was May. All through the warm night, squadrons of birds were passing across the face of the moon. All night long their voices drifted down out of the dark like gossip from another world. But to a listener in the night another voice was clearer, louder, more insistent —now like the striking of crystal cymbals, now like an elfin chuckling, always a breathless, never-ending whisper—the voice of running water.

He heard none of these things. He stood where he had first come into the full moonlight, his face turned up to receive it, drinking in its brightness. It tingled in him like a draught from the things he had forgotten, in another world. It dissolved the dull ache of cold that was in his body and mind, that stiffened his swollen limbs and lay like an icy nugget behind his eyes. It soaked into him, and into the world about him, so that every corner shone with its own pale light, white and vaporous, as far as he could see.

It was a strange world. What that other world had been like, before, he did not remember, but this was different. The moonlight flooded it with a pearly mist through which the columns of the trees rose like shadowy stalagmites. The light-mist was not from the moon alone; it was a part of this new world and of the things that were in it. The gray lichens under his feet were outlined with widening ripples of light. Light pulsed through the rough bark of the tree trunks and burned like tiny corpse-candles at the tip of every growing twig. The spruces and balsams were furred with silvery needles of light. A swirling mist of light hung ankle-deep over the forest floor, broken by black islands of rock. Light was in everything in this new world he was in, save only for the rock, and for himself.

He drank in the moonlight through every pore, and it burned gloriously in him and flowed down through every vein and bone of his body, driving out the dank cold that was in his flesh. But the light that soaked into him did not shine out again as it did from the budding trees, and the moss, and the lichens. He looked down at his swollen hands and flexed their puffed blue fingers; he moved his toes in their sodden boots, and felt the clammy touch of the wet rags that clung to his body. Under them, out of the moonlight, he was still cold with that pervading chill that was like the frozen breath of winter in him. He squatted in the pool of light that lay over the ledge and stripped them from him, clumsily and painfully, then lay back on the stone and stared up into the smiling visage of the moon.

TIME PASSED, but whether it was minutes or hours, or whether there were still such things as minutes and hours, he could not have said. Time had no meaning for him in this new, strange world. Time passed, because the moon was higher and its light stronger and

warmer on his naked flesh, but he did not sense its passage. Every part of the forest pulsed with its own inner light in response. As the feeling of warmth grew in him it brought another feeling, a dull hunger gnawing at his vitals, making him restless. He moved close to a great beech whose limbs reached high above the tops of the other trees around it, and felt the quick chill as its shadow fell across him. Then he had clasped it in both arms, his whole body pressing eagerly against its glowing trunk, and the light that welled out of it was thrilling through him like a flame, stirring every atom of him. He tweaked a long, pointed bud from a twig. It lay in his palm like a jewel of pale fire before he raised it to his mouth and felt its warmth spread into him.

He ate buds as long as he could find them, stripping them from the twigs with clumsy fingers, grubbing hungrily in the moss for the ones that fell. He crushed them between his teeth and swallowed them, and the fire that glowed in them spread into his chilled flesh and warmed it a little. He tore patches of lichen from the rock, but they were tough and woody and he could not swallow them. He broke off spruce twigs, needled with the life-light, but the resin in them burned his lips and tongue and choked him.

He sat, hunched against a rock, staring blindly into the glowing depths of the forest. The things he had swallowed had helped a little to alleviate the cold that was in his bones, but they did not dull the gnawing hunger or the thirst that was torturing him. They had life, and the warmth that was life, but not the thing he needed—the thing he must somehow have.

At the edge of his field of vision something moved. It drifted noiselessly through the burning treetops, like a puff of luminous cloud. It settled on a branch above his head, and he twisted his neck back and stared up at it with hollow, burning eyes. The white light-mist was very bright about it. He could feel its warmth, even at this distance. And there was something more. The hunger gripped him, fiercer than ever, and thirst shiveled his gullet.

The owl had seen him and decided that he was another rotting stump. It sat hunched against the trunk of the great spruce, looking and listening for its prey. Presently it was rewarded by some small sound or a wafted scent, and spread its silent wings to float like a phantom into the night. It did not see the misshapen thing it had thought a stump, struggle to its feet and follow.

A porcupine, high in a birch, saw the owl pass and ignored it, as it well could. A roosting crow woke suddenly and froze on its perch, petrified with terror. But the great bird swept past, intent on other prey.

There were clearings in the forest, even this high, where trees had been cut off and brambles had followed. All manner of small creatures followed the brambles, and here was rich hunting for the owl and its kind.

He came to the edge of the clearing in time to see the owl strike and hear the scream of the hurt rabbit. To his eyes it was as though a bolt of shining fire had plunged through the night to strike a second ball of fire on the ground. Shambling forward, careless of the briars, he hurled himself on the two animals before the owl could free itself or take the air again.

The huge bird slashed at him savagely with beak and talons, laying open

the puffy flesh of his face in great, curving gashes, but he bit deep into its breast, through feathers and skin, tearing at its flesh with his teeth and letting the hot, burning blood gush into his parched throat and spill over his cracked lips. His fingers kneaded and tore at its body, breaking it into bits that he could stuff into his mouth. Feathers and bone he spat out, and the rabbit's fur when the owl was gone, but the hollow in his belly was filled, and the thirst gone, and the aching cold in his numbed bones had been washed away. It seemed to him that his fingers were shining a little with the same wan light that emanated from the other things of the forest.

He hunted all that night, through the clearing and the nearby forest, and found and ate two wood mice and a handful of grubs and other insects. He found that the tightly coiled fiddle-heads of growing ferns were full of life and more palatable than buds or lichens. As the deadening cold left him he could move more freely, think more keenly, but the thirst was growing on him again.

Out of the lost memories of that world he had left, the murmur of running water came to him. Water should quench thirst. He could hear it below him on the mountainside, through the mist, plashing over bare stones, gurgling through tunnels in the roots and moss. He heard it in the distance, far below in the valley, roaring against boulders and leaping over ledges in foaming abandon. As he listened, a chill crept over him, as though a shadow were passing, but the feeling left him. Slowly and painfully he began to pick his way down the mountainside.

The water burst out at the base of a rock wall, lay for a little in a deep, clear pool under the cliff and then slipped away through the moss, twisting and turning, sliding over flat stones and diving into crevices, welling up in tiny, sparkling fountains and vanishing again under tangles of matted roots and fallen tree trunks, growing and running ever faster until it leaped over the last cliff and fell in a spatter of flashing drops into the valley. He saw it, and stopped.

Black vapor lay close over it like a carpet. It made a pathway of black, winding through the luminous mist that hung over the forest floor. Where the rill lay quiet in a pool it was thin, and the moonlight struck through and sparkled on the clear water, but where the little stream hurried over roots and stones, the black fog lay dense and impenetrable, dull and lifeless.

He licked his lips uneasily with his swollen tongue and moved cautiously forward. The chill had come on him again, numbing his nerves, dulling his laboring brain. Water quenched thirst; he still remembered that somehow, and this singing, shining stuff was water. At the base of the cliff, where the water welled up under the rock, the black fog was thinnest. He knelt and dipped his cupped hands into the water,

As the black mist closed over them, all feeling went out of his hands. Cold —terrible, numbing cold—ate its way like acid into his flesh and bones. The mist was draining the warmth—the life —out of him, through his hands and arms—sucking him dry of the life-stuff he had drunk with the owl's blood and soaked in from the moon's white rays. He swayed to his feet, then collapsed in a heap beside the stream.

He lay there helpless for a long time. Little by little the moonlight revived him. Little by little the numbness went

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out of his muscles, and he could move his legs and grip things with his fingers. He pulled his legs under him and got to his feet, leaning against the cliff for support. He stared with burning eyes at the water, and felt the first clutching at his gullet and the hunger gnawing in his vitals. Water was death to him. The black fog that lay close over running water was deadly, draining the life-force out of whatever touched it. It was death! But blood—fresh, burning, glowing blood was life!

Something rattled in the shadow of the cliff. His eyes found it—a lolloping bundle of fiery spines, humping along a worn path that led over the rocks to the little pool, a porcupine come to drink. He sensed the life in it, and hunger twisted his belly, but the black barrier of running water was between him and it.

It shambled down to the pool's edge and drank, the glow of its bristling body shining through the black fog over the water. It crossed the little rill where it was narrowest, below the pool, and came rattling up the path toward him, unafraid.

He killed it. His face and body were studded with quills before it was dead, but he tore open its body with his two numb hands and let its hot blood swill down his throat and give him back the warmth and life that the black mist had drained out of him. Blood was all he needed—he had learned that—and he left the porcupine's limp carcass by the path and turned back into the forest.

Water was everywhere, here on the lower slopes of the mountain. Its black runways ribbed the glowing floor of the forest on every side. It made a wall of cold about the place where he was, so that he had to climb back to the summit of the ridge and go around its sources.

The sun rose, bringing a scathing

golden light that shriveled his pallid flesh and brought the thirst up unbearably in his throat, driving him to the shelter of a cave. Blood would quench that awful, growing thirst, and drive out the cold that crept relentlessly over him, but it was hard to find blood. Other things would kill the cold—buds and growing things—but they could not quench the thirst or appease the savage hunger in him.

THERE WAS another night, at last, and he stood in the bright light of the shrinking moon, high on a bare spur overlooking the valley. All the world lay before him, washed in silver and lined with black. He could see mountain after mountain, furred with the light of growing trees, blanketed in the glowing mist, their bald black crowns outlined against the moonlit clouds. He could see the mountain torrents streaking down their flanks, like inky ribbons, joining, broadening, flowing down to join the river that roared sullenly under its black shroud in the valley at his feet.

The valley was full of life. It was alive with growing things, and the white mist that rose from them and clothed them filled it in the brim with a broth of light through which the river and its tributaries cut sharp black lines of cold. There were other lights—yellow constellations of lamplight scattered over the silver meadows. Many of them clustered at the mouth of the valley, where the mountains drew apart, but they grew fewer and fewer as they followed the black barrier of the river, and at the head of the valley below him one glowing spark burned by itself.

He stood with the moonlight washing his naked, dead-white body, staring at that speck of golden light. There was something he should know about it—something that was hidden in that other world he had been in. There was something that drew him to it—an invisible thread, stretched across space through the white night, binding him to it.

The next day he lay buried under a rotting log, halfway down the mountain. The following night, soon after moonup, he came on a doe, its back broken, pinned under a fallen tree. He tore its throat out and drank the fuming blood that poured heat and life through his body, waking him, filling him with vigor. The cold was gone, and he was sure now that his fingers were glowing with a light of their own. Now he was really alive!

He followed a ridge, and before sunrise he came to the river's edge. The blackness was an impenetrable wall, hiding the other shore. Through it he could hear the rush of running water over gravel, the gurgle of eddies and the mutter of rapids. The sound tormented him and brought the thirst back into his throat, but he drew back into the forest, for the sky was already brightening in the East.

When the moon rose on the fourth night he had found nothing to eat. Its light brought him down out of the forest again, to the river's edge, where it broadened into a quiet mill-pond. The black fog was thin over the glassy surface of the water, and through it he saw the yellow lamplight of the house that had drawn him down from the mountain.

He stood waist-deep in the weeds that bordered the pond, watching those two yellow rectangles. Back in the icy blankness of his mind a memory was struggling to be known. But it belonged to the other world, the world he had left behind, and it faded.

The reflection of the lights lay in the still water of the pond. So still was it that the mist was but a black gauze drawn across the lamplight, dulling it. The water lay like a sheet of black glass, hard and polished, with the phantoms of the pines on its other bank growing upside-down in its quiet depths. The stars were reflected there in little winking spots, and the dwindling circle of the moon.

HE DID NOT HEAR the door slam, there among the pines. A new feeling was growing in him. It was strange. It was not thirst—not hunger. It submerged them in its all-powerful compulsion. It gripped his muscles and took them out of his control, forcing him step by step through the cat tails to the rivers' edge. There was something he must do. Something—

She came out of the shadows and stood in the moonlight on the other bank, looking up at the moon. The lamplight was behind her and the silver torrent of the moon poured over her slim, white body, over her shining black hair, caressing every line and curve of her long, slim figure. Her own light clung to her like a silver aura, soft and warm, welling out of her white skin and clinging lovingly about her, cloaking her beauty with light. That beauty drew him—out of the shadows, out of the forest, into the moonlight.

She did not see him at first. The night was warm and there was the first perfume of spring in the air. She stood on a rock at the water's edge, her arms lifted, her hands clasping her flood of night-black hair behind her head. All her young body was taut, stretching, welcoming the moonlight and the touch of the night breeze that sent little cats-paws shivering over the glassy water. The moon seemed to be floating in the water, there just beyond her reach. She knotted her hair in a bun behind her head and stepped down quickly into the water. She stood with it just above her knees, watching the ripples widen and break the mirror surface of the pond. She followed their spread across that glassy disk.

She saw him.

He stood there, his face half in shadow, hunched and naked. His arms were skeleton's arms and his ribs showed under skin that hung in flabby white folds from his shoulders. His eyes were black pits and a stubble of black beard was smeared across his sagging cheeks. The mark of the owl's claws was across his face and it was pocked with purple blotches where he had pulled out the porcupine quills. Some of them were still in his side, where the beast's tail had lashed him. His flesh was livid white in the moonlight, blotched and smeared with the dark stain of death.

She saw him and knew him. Her hand went to the little cross that glowed like a coal of golden fire in the hollow of her throat. Her voice rose and choked back:

"Joe! *Joe!*"

He saw her and remembered her. The thread he had felt on the mountain had been her presence, pulling him to her, stronger than thirst or hunger, stronger than death, stronger even than the black fog over the river. It was between them now, tightening, dragging him step by step into the silent water. Ripples broke against his legs and he felt the black mist rising from them, felt the numbness creeping into his feet, into his legs, up into his body. It was a day since he had killed the deer and

had blood to warm him. He could not go on. He stood knee-deep, staring at her across the little space that separated them. He tried to speak, to call her name, but he had forgotten words.

Then she screamed and ran, a stream of white fire through the shadows, and he heard the house door slam after her and saw the shades come down, one after the other, over the yellow lamplight. He stood there, staring after her, until the cold crept up and began to choke him, and he turned and stumbled painfully ashore.

THE SUN found him high on the mountain, climbing from ledge to ledge, above the sources of the rushing torrents that walled him in, making his way toward the saddle that closed the valley's end. He could not cross running water, but he could go around it. He killed a rabbit and its blood helped him to go on, with the cold seeping up through his bones and hunger and thirst tearing at him like wild things. The new hunger, the yearning that drew him to the girl in the valley, was stronger than they. It was all that mattered now.

The moon was in the sky when he stood under the pines before the closed door of the house. Half the night was gone, and clouds were gathering, filling up the sky and strewing long streamers across the moon's shrunken face. In the East thunder muttered, rolling among the mountains until it died away beneath the sound of the river.

The tie that was between them was like a rope of iron, pulling him across the narrow clearing to the doorstep of the house. The door was closed and the shades drawn over the windows on either side of it, but yellow lamplight streamed out through cracks in its weathered panels. He raised a hand to touch it and drew back as he saw the pattern of crossed planks that barred him and his kind.

He whimpered low in his throat, like the doe he had killed. The cross wove a steel net across the doorway that he could not break. He stepped back, off the doorstep. Then the door opened. She stood there.

Her back was to the light and he could see only the slim silhouette of her body, with the cross of golden fire at her throat and the aura of silvery mist clinging about her, so warm and bright that he was sure it must drown out the moonlight. Even through the dress she wore the fire of her young vitality shone

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out. He stood bathing in it, yearning for it, as the hunger and thirst and aching longing welled up in him through the bitter cold.

It was a minute perhaps, or five minutes, or only seconds until she spoke. Her voice was faint.

"Joe," she said. "Joe dear. You're hurt. Come inside."

The pattern of the cross on the door could not bar him after her welcome. He felt the barrier dissolve as he stepped through. The clouds had drawn away and the moon made a bright spot through the open door. He stood in it, watching her, seeing the familiar room with its scrubbed board floor, its plastered walls, its neat, black stove—seeing them as if for the first time. They stirred no memory in him. But the girl drew him.

He saw her dark eyes blacken with horror and the blood drain out of her cheeks and lips as she saw him for the first time in the lamplight. He looked down at his hands—the flesh cheese-white and sloughing—at his naked, discolored body, smeared with mud and stained with spilled blood. He whimpered, down in his throat, and took a stumbling step toward her, but her hand went up to the little crucifix at her throat and she slipped quickly around the table, placing it between them.

He stared at the cross. The golden fire that burned in it separated them as surely as the cold black fog of running water had done. Across the table he could feel its pure radiance, hot as the sunlight. It would shrivel him to a cinder. He whined again, in agony, like a whipped dog. The longing for her was sheer torment now, drowning out all else, but it could not force him nearer.

The girl followed his gaze. The crucifix had been his gift—before—in that other world. She knew that, though he did not. Slowly she unfastened the ribbon that held it and dropped it into his outstretched hand.

The cross burned into his flesh like a hot coal. He snatched back his hand but the burning metal clung. He felt the heat of it coursing up his arm, and hurled it savagely across the room. He seized the table with both hands and flung it out of his way. Then she was before him, her back against the wall, her face a mask of horror. He heard her scream.

In him the terrible yearning that had drawn him down from the mountain had submerged the hunger and thirst and cold that had been his only driving forces before he knew her. Now, as they stood face to face, the older, stronger forces surged up in him and took possession of his numbed mind. With her scream a dam in him seemed to burst. He felt her warm, slim body twisting and jerking under his tightening fingers. He sensed the fragrance that rose from her. He saw her eyes, mad with fear, staring into his.

When it was over the hunger was gone, and the thirst. The cold had gone out of his bones. His muscles were no longer cramped and leaden. The yearning was gone, too. He looked down incuriously at the heap of shredded rags on the floor and turned to go.

At that moment the storm broke. The door was still open, and as he turned it seemed to be closed by a curtain of falling water. The black fog swirled among the raindrops, blotting out the world. He thrust out an exploring hand, marked with the charred

brand of the cross, and snatched it back as he felt the chill of the mist.

He heard their voices only a moment before they stood there—three men, dripping, crowded together in the doorway, staring at the thing on the floor—and at him. For a flicker he remembered: Louis—her brother—and Jean and old Paul. The dogs were with them, but they slunk back, whining, afraid.

Louis knew him, as his sister had—as the others did. His whisper had hate in it as much as fear. It was on all their faces. They knew the curse that was on the unshriven of Joe Labatie's blood. They had known what it meant when he did not come down from the mountain on the night of the first storm. But only Louis, of them all, had seen the tree topple and pin him down. Louis it was who had made the mark of the cross in the snow that drifted over him and left him there. Louis Larue, who would not see the Labatie curse fall on his sister or her children after her.

It was old Paul whose gun bellowed. They saw the buckshot tear through that death-white body—saw the dark fluid that dripped from the awful wound—saw the dead thing that was Joe Labatie, his skull's eyes burning, as he surged toward them. They ran.

Louis held his ground, but the thing that rushed upon him was like a charging bear. It struck him and hurled him to the floor. Its slippery fingers bit into his shoulders: its hideous face hung close to his. But the crucifix at his throat saved him, as it might have saved her, and the thing recoiled and plunged out into the storm.

The rain was like ice on his naked body as he fled, rinsing the strength out of him as it might dissolve salt. The black mist filled the forest, blotting out the silver light of its living things. It closed over his body and sank into it, sucking out the unnatural life he had drunk in blood, draining it of warmth. He felt the great cold growing in him again. The moon was gone, and he was blind—cold and numb and blind. He crashed into a tree, and then another, and then his weakening legs buckled under him and he fell face down at the river's edge.

He lay in the running water, shrouded in the black fog, feeling them approach. He heard their footsteps on the gravel, and felt their hands on him, dragging him out of the water, turning him over. He saw them—three pillars of white light, the yellow fire of their crucifixes at their throats, the black mist billowing around their bodies as they stood staring down at him. He felt Louis' boot as it swung brutally into his side and felt the bones snap and the flesh tear, but there was no pain—only the cold, the bitter, freezing cold that was always in him.

He knew that they were busy at something, but the cold was creeping up into his brain, behind his eyes, as the rain wrapped him in its deadly mist. Perhaps when the moon rose again its light would revive him. Perhaps he would kill again and feel the hot blood in his throat, and be free of the cold. He could barely see now, though his eyes were open and staring. He could see that old Paul had a long stake of wood in his hands, sharpened to a point. He saw Louis take it and raise it in both hands above his head. He saw Louis' teeth shine white in a savage grin.

He saw the stake sweep down—

THE END.

THE HAUNT

by THEODORE STURGEON

● It seemed like a good idea to crack the cast-iron poise of the girl by a little synthetic haunt. Sound effects, radio variety were intended, but—

Illustrated by R. Isip

Just a gag, that's all—a gag. I'm sure it was. It had to be. Heck, we were wise, Tommy and me. Tommy was a radio technician and a good one, and I knew the gadgets to the last hidden loud-speaker and the last Fahnestock clip almost as well as he did. Tommy was a funny egg, anyway. Foggy, you know—the kind of guy that shows up at work with one brown shoe and one black, or dunks his cafeteria check in his coffee and hands a doughnut to the waiter to punch. But—he knew his stuff, he had the apparatus, and the idea tickled him. I can see his point there. Scaring the living daylights out of a cool cookie like Miriam Jensen was a challenge to any man.

Her rock-hard nerves were by no means here only striking characteristic. She was smooth—smooth to look at, smooth to talk to, smooth in the way she thought and acted and moved. Tall, you know—dark brunette, long slim neck, small head and features; quite tall—that kind. A knockout. Brains, too, and she used them. I don't believe anything but hard exercise could raise her pulse more than one-two beats a minute. I know that the funny idea I had that it would be nice to be married to her didn't have her at all fluttery. She laughed me off. When I asked for her lily-white hand, did she say she'd be a sister to me? Did she tell me tenderly that we weren't suited? Did she say so much as "No"? Uh-huh. She said: "You're cute, Bill. Didn't anyone ever tell you how cute you were?" And she giggled. I stood there with my teeth in my mouth and my bare face hanging out, watching her walk away; and then and there I said to myself, "I'm going to shake her off her high horse, by all that's unholy, if I have to kill her to do it."

I came home—lived in an apartment hotel then—and met Tommy in the hall. I dragged him into my place, stuck a drink in his hand, and figuratively wept on his shoulder about it for the best part of an hour, while he sat there doddering his untidy hair up and down and watching the bubbles collect on the bottom of an ice cube.

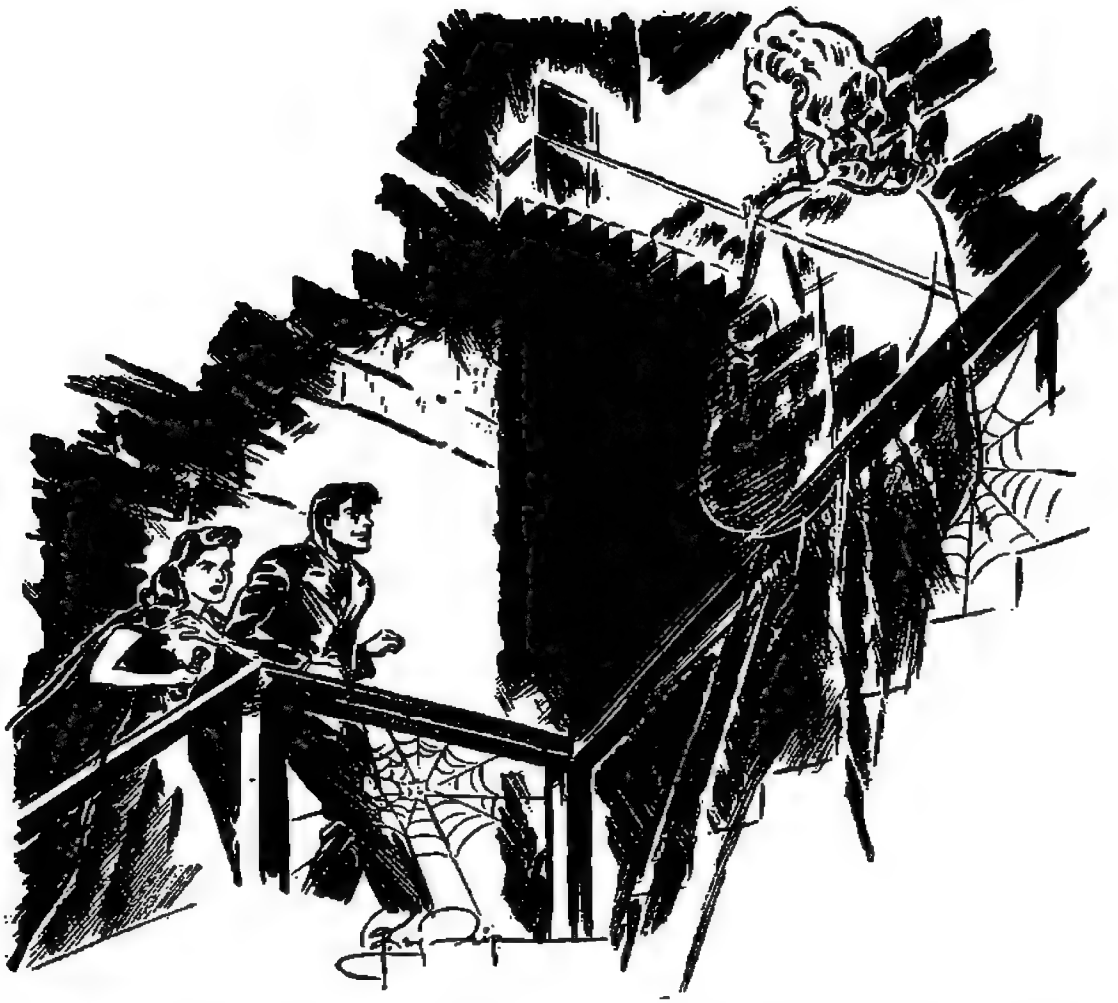
"W-what do y-you want to do about it?" he asked.

"I told you—slap her down. If I could think of a way to slap her down so that it would do *me* some good, I'd do it, too. But you can't walk up to a woman, take a poke at her, and expect her to marry you for it."

"You can with s-some women," Tommy observed with the profundity of a confirmed celibate.

"Not with this one," I snorted. "No, I've got to scare the bustle cover off her, and then rescue her, maybe. Or show her that I'm not scared by the same thing. Or both. Got any ideas?"

"I th-think you're a ph-phony, Bill."



"I didn't mean your ideas about me. Come on—you're supposed to run to brains. Forget the personalities and let's have a brain wave or two."

Tommy stared at the ceiling and gravely ground out his cigarette two inches away from an ash tray. "What's she sc-sc-frightened of, do you think?"

I walked up and down for a couple of minutes, trying to frown out an answer to that one. "Nothing, as far as I've ever heard," I said. "Miriam will dive off a sixty-foot platform, or break a bronc, or drive a midget racer, and breathe no harder for it than she does after a fast conga. I tell you, that girl's nerves—if she has any—are made of iridium-plated piano wire."

"I bet she's superstitious," said Tommy.

"What? Ghosts, you mean? Huh. Could be, but what—"

"Easy." Tommy set his half-empty glass down on the floor from about waist height. "We'll make her some ghosts—you'll rescue her from them."

"Swell. What do we do—draw some magic squares on the hotel carpet around a pot of devil's brew or something?"

"N-no. We take a couple coils of wire and my little public-speaking s-system, and maybe a few colored lights and

stuff. And we haunt a house. Th-then you bring your iridium girl friend in. J-just leave it to me."

"That sounds like quite something, Tommy," I said. I was so tickled with the idea that I remembered I hadn't had a drink and began pouring myself one. "Miriam's a sucker for a dare. But the Lord help me if she ever found out about this."

Tommy looked at me vaguely and grinned. "I don't know nothin', ch-chief," he said, and got up to go. "I'll l-let you know what I dream up on this. B-Bill. Night." He went through the door.

I thanked him, pulled him out of the bathroom, and saw him to the right door. I never did meet such a foggy fellow.

INSIDE OF A WEEK he had it rigged up and took me out there to look it over. The house was a chalet over a century old. It had hedges in front of it gone hog wild, and the once-green paint was a filthy gray. It had eleven-foot ceilings and Venetian shutters which were in the last stages of decay, full of tartar and cavities, as it were. I don't know how Tommy had gotten hold of it, but he had, and man, how he'd rigged it up!

"You s-see," he explained, "the old place has a history, too. There have been four murders here, and th-three suicides. The l-last guy who owned it starved to death in the cellar." He motioned me after him and started through the weeds toward the back. I looked up at the gloomy old pile and shuddered.

"What are we going around the back for?" I asked.

"So the dust in the f-front hallway will look as if no one has been here in the last twenty years," he said, opening a cellar window. "G-go on—climb in."

I did, and he tumbled in after me. He threaded his way through large piles of rubbish until he came to a partition. He opened a door in it and we found ourselves inside a neatly arranged control room. Pointing, Tommy said, "See th-that board? There's a photo cell and relay laid across every door in the house. Any time anyone goes into a room I know which one it is by the number underneath the light. There's my mike over there, and a phonograph pick-up. There's a hot-air system in the house; I put the speaker in the furnace, and when I play my little collection of m-moans and groans and shrieks from those recordings, you c-can hear them all over the house. It sounds swell."

"It does," I grinned. "But why do you have to know which room we're going to be in?"

"For the l-lights," he said. He showed me a battery of half a dozen knife switches and a rheostat. "Some of the lights are ultraviolet, and they shine on fluorescent paint on the opposite wall. You s-see something there, and when you turn your flashlight on it, it's gone. Some of the lights are photo flashes. Oh, it'll be quite a sh-show."

"It sure will," I said, delighted.

"Now, when you b-bring your little lump of dry ice in," said Tommy—I gathered he was referring to Miriam—"take her in the front way. Here—I've typed out all the stories about the p-people who died in this place, and all the dope about how and where they g-got knocked off. Tell her all the yarns and take her into all the rooms. You'll know what to expect. That's all I can do—you'll have to figure out the rest yourself."

"You've done enough," I said, slap-

ping him on the back so that his glasses fell off and broke. He pulled another pair out of his pocket and put them on. "Don't worry," I said. "This ought to cut some of her ice."

He gave me a few more details and took me on a tour of the place. Then I took my typewritten sheets and went home to bone up on them. It should be a snap, I thought. Anyhow, it should have been.

I CORNERED Miriam two nights later. I came up behind her and whispered in her ear, "Will you marry me?"

She said, "Oh, hello, Bill," without even turning around.

"Miriam," I said hoarsely, "I asked you a question!"

She gently slid her shoulder out from under my hand. "And I said 'Hello, Bill.'" She grinned.

I gnashed my teeth and tried to be calm.

"Do you like ghosts?" I asked irrelevantly.

"Dunno. I never met one," she said. "Don't you ever ask girls to dance?"

"No." I said. "I sweep 'em off their feet onto the floor when I feel like dancing, which I don't right now. I want to talk about ghosts."

"A safe subject," she observed. I nodded my head toward one of those pieces of furniture-euphemistically called love seats, and we threaded our way through the crowd of people—it was one of those parties that Reggie Johns used to throw for people he didn't know. That is, he'd invite six couples he knew and forty or fifty would arrive.

"In 1853," I said oratorically, "Joachim Grandt—spelled with a 'd'—was murdered by person or persons unknown in the first floor back of an old Swiss chalet up on Grove Street. A rumor circulated to the effect that the room was haunted. This so depreciated the value of the house and grounds that Joachim's great-nephew, Harrison Grandt—also spelled with a 'd'—tried to prove that it was not haunted by spending a night there. He was found the next morning by one Harry Fortunato, strangled to death in exactly the manner used by the aforementioned person or persons. Fortunato was so exercised by this strange turn of events that he rushed out of the house and broke his neck on the front steps."

"All this is quite bewildering," said Miriam softly, "but it seems to me that it is hardly the thing to whisper into my shell-like ear when we could be dancing."

"Damn it, Miriam—"

"—also spelled with a 'd,'" she interjected.

"Let me finish telling you about this. After Fortunato's death there were two more murders and two supposed suicides, all of them either stranglings or neck-breakings. Now, the house is supposed to be really haunted. They say you can really see the spooks and hear voices and rattles and so forth—all the fixin's. I found out where the place is."

"Oh? And what might that have to do with—"

"You? Well, I've heard tell that you aren't afraid of man, woman or beast. I just wondered about ghosts."

"Don't be childish, Bill. Ghosts live inside the heads of foolish people and pop out when the foolish people want to be frightened."

"Not these ghosts."

She regarded me amusedly. "Don't tell me you've seen them?"

I nodded.

She said, "That proves my point. Let's dance."

She half rose, but I caught her wrist and yanked her back. I don't think she liked it. "Don't tell me you're afraid to go and see for yourself, Iron Woman?"

"Nobody suggested it."

"I just did."

She stopped yearning toward the dance floor and settled back. "Ah—so that's the idea. Go on—let's have it," she said in a I-won't-do-it-but-I'd-like-to-hear-about-it tone of voice.

"We just go out there and investigate it," I said. "Frankly, I'd like to see your hair curl."

"Let me get this straight," she said. "You and I are going out at this time of night to a deserted house in a deserted neighborhood to catch us a ghost. Right?" Her raised eyebrow added, "Monkey business, hey?"

"No!" I said immediately. "No monkey business. My word on that." Of course, Tommy's electrical ghosts were monkey business, but that was not what she and her eyebrow meant by monkey business.

"Real ghosts," she mused. "Bill, if this is some kind of a joke—"

"With me, lady," I said with real sincerity, "this is no joke."

She insinuated herself out of the love seat onto her feet and said, "Stand by, then, while I tell Reggie we're leaving. I came with Roger Sykes, but he doesn't have to know anything about it."

While she was gone I got some grinning done. Just like clockwork, it was—this was the night Tommy had said he'd pick to throw a scare into her. She'd fallen for the bait better than I ever could have hoped, and it certainly looked as if everything was breaking my way. Maybe if I could get her scared enough we could head for Gretna Green. Could be—could be.

I saw her at the door, waiting for me. She was dressed in something skin-tight and yet flowing, with a long white panel front and back, and black shoulders and sides—I dunno—I'm no dressmaker, but the dress was like the rest of her—smooth. And now she had slipped a great black cloak over her shoulders that fell away from her body at the sides and looked like wings. What a woman! I sighed, envying myself because I was going to have her to myself for a few hours.

We climbed into my ancient but efficient old struggle buggy. "Where is this place?" Miriam asked as I pulled away from the curb.

I glanced at her, taking in the way she wound her cloak about her and writhed deeper into it. Every move a miracle, I thought. "I told you," I said, keeping my thoughts to myself. "Up on Grove Street, on top of Toad Hill, across the street from a junk yard."

"I know about where it is," she said. "Tarry not, my fran'—pile some coal on and let's get there. I've always wanted to meet up with a ghost."

Her tone was one I'd heard before, once in a while. The time, for instance, that one of the boys had been trying to lasso a post with a length of clothesline and she had grabbed it from him impatiently, saying, "Dammit, Joe, you make me nervous. Here," and had whirled it once and snagged the post on the first cast. And that other time when one of the horses from the riding academy broke its leg taking a hedge. While half a dozen people looked on, she picked up an edged stone and with one clean blow killed the horse. "It was the only thing to do," she explained bluntly. "None of you blockheads have

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even started back to the academy for a gun yet. What do you want to do—leave the animal to lie here screaming for a solid hour?"

"What makes you that way?" I asked her. She looked at me questioningly. "I mean, why are you always ducking in to do more or less violent things? Why don't you learn to knit?"

"I can knit," she said shortly, in a voice that said, "Oh, dry up."

So I dried up, contenting myself with the joyful play of street lights on her darkened profile, and wondering if I were a heel to pull this sort of a trick. We drew up eventually in front of the house. Miriam got out and stared up at it. It loomed gray and forbidding in the light of a half-moon. Before it, striving their dark utmost to hide the front walk, were the tangled, twelve-foot hedges. The whole place had a greedily unkempt look—it was a dirty old panhandler of a house, begging the right to exist another moment. Miriam walked up to the hedge and stopped, and I don't know whether she was hesitating or just waiting for me. We went up the path together.

I noticed with satisfaction that Tommy had either taken a taxi or parked his car on another street. That had bothered me a little—he was damn clever, but a little short on foresight. When we reached the top of the steps I covertly touched the doorbell. There was no sound—it would light a bulb on Tommy's board so he'd know we were in. I handed Miriam one of the two flashlights I had stowed in the car, and pushed open the door.

Miriam caught my arm. "Ladies first, you clod," she laughed, and slid in ahead of me.

The floor of the foyer settled two inches under her feet with a bump; she flailed one arm a little to get her balance and turned to me, smiling coolly. "Coming, Bill?"

We found ourselves in a high, narrow hallway containing a flight of stairs far too big for it.

"Hello-o-o! Who's the-e-e-ere—"

"Huh?" Miriam and I asked each other. The voice had been tiny, just the echo of an echo, but clear as a bos'n's pipe. "I didn't say anything," we chorused, and then Miriam said, "Either we're not the only investigators or the ghosts are wasting no time on us. Either way, I like it here. Where to first, Bill?"

She'll have to get a little more scared than that before I can show her up, I thought. "Upstairs," I said. "We'll start at the top and work down."

SIDE BY SIDE, we headed up the old steps, scything great lumps of darkness away with our lights. At the first landing, Miriam walked ahead, as the stairs narrowed here. As she crossed the landing, I saw her heel sink as her weight whipped a loose board up on end. I caught it just before it could belt the back of her head.

"Thanks, pal," she said evenly. "I'll do the same for you some time." Never turned a hair!

Almost to the top, I thought I heard something. "Don't look now," I said in a hushed voice, "but I don't want you to miss anything, and I think I hear someone laughing."

We froze and stopped breathing to give the faint sound a chance. "That isn't laughing," said Miriam.

I listened more carefully. "Check," I said, "but from the sound of it, whatever is being laughed about should be cried over. Good heavens, what a crazy sound."

It was a burbly noise, so quiet it was almost intimate, and it sobbed in peals. Miriam snorted as if she were trying to blow an evil smell out of her nostrils. I wiped sweat off the palms of my hands. Where the hell had Tommy picked up *that* recording?

We tiptoed across the second-floor hall and Miriam pushed open a door. Dust swirled up as it swung noiselessly back, far faster than was warranted, and a great dim shape loomed up out of it.

Smash!

A splintering crash behind us, and that unimaginable something ahead of us. I jumped to the right and Miriam to the left, and for a second the whole world was made of flailing electric beams and hidden menace. Miriam, to be frank, calmed down first; at least, enough to steady her flashlight on one of the sources of our panic. It was the old print that had been hanging in the hallway. Its nail had pulled out of the loose plaster, probably because of one of my dainty No. 10 footfalls, and it had fallen to the floor, smashing the glass in the picture frame. I shot my light at the open door. Just inside was a tall piece of furniture, an old-fashioned secretary desk, covered with a dusty white cloth.

"A little jumpy, aren't you, Bill?" called Miriam cheerfully as she came over to me.

I thrust my tongue between my teeth so they wouldn't chatter so loudly, and tried to grin doing it. In that crazy light I think I got away with it. Miriam must have thought I felt fine, because she rather readily let me lead the way into the room.

THERE WAS NOTHING much there but dust and a couple of broken chairs. At the back of the room was another door. With Miriam treading on my heels, I went through it. I stood just inside, fencing with the blackness with my torch and seeing nothing, stepped aside to let Miriam in. Something touched me lightly on the shoulder—

Bong! Whee-hoo! Bong! Whee-hoo! Bong!

Miriam said "Gha!" with an intake of breath and grabbed at my arm, making me drop my light. It thumped to the floor and went out, and she pawed at hers, accidentally flipped the switch. Darkness hit us so hard our knees sagged under the weight of it, and my cold-blooded darling wrapped both arms around my head, which was the first thing she contacted; and she began making a noise like a duckling at the ripe old age of two hours. The bonging and whee-hooing went right on, until Miriam's hand, in a convulsive contraction, turned on her light again. We found ourselves staring up at an old-style cuckoo clock. It and its cuckoo were telling us the falsehood that it was eleven o'clock. I must have bumped into the pendulum and set it off.

Miriam stood there with her arms around me until the silly wooden bird had finished and retired; and yet a moment longer. This was my moment, and by damn if I wasn't too upset to appreciate it. Then she let me go, and said through a funny little smile, "Bill—I think maybe this is comic. Laugh a bit, huh?"

I licked some moisture off my upper lip onto a dry tongue. "Ha, ha," I said without enthusiasm.

Miriam said firmly, "The laughing noise was water in a pipe somewhere. That crash was a picture falling off the wall. We both saw it. The ah . . thing in the doorway was an old bookcase covered with a dust cloth.

This last ghost of yours was a cuckoo clock. Right?"

"Right."

"And that 'Who's there' we heard when we came in was was— What was it, anyway?"

"Imagination," I said promptly. "Although I know damn well *I* didn't imagine it."

"I did, then," she said stubbornly, and added, "Enough for both of us." Her wry grin was a sight to behold.

"Must be," I said, picking up my flashlight and trying to make my fingers behave enough to unscrew the reflector and slip in a spare bulb. I managed it, somehow. "And are you by any slim chance imagining — *that*, too?" I pointed. She pivoted.

"That" was a blob of light on the wall, so dim it was all but invisible. The beam from her torch had been on another wall, or I wouldn't have seen it at all. As I stared breathlessly, looking at its shades and shadowy outlines, I began to make out what it was.

"It looks like a . . . . a neck!" whispered Miriam, backing onto my feet. The thing was indeed a neck, flesh-pink and mottled with deep fingerlike gouges of blue-black. It held for just a few seconds and then faded out.

I gulped and said, "Pretty!"

Miriam whipped her light around and splashed it on the wall. The beam wasn't steady, and she didn't say anything.

"Miriam—I feel like dancing, I think."

"There's no music here," she said quietly. "We'd have to go somewhere else."

"Yeah," I said, and gulped. "We would, wouldn't we?" But neither of us moved.

Finally she shrugged and took a deep breath. "What are you waiting for, Bill? Let's go!"

"Go? Dancing, you mean?"

"Dancing!" she contraltoed scornfully. "We were going to explore this house, weren't we? Come on, then."

"Quite a feller, aren't you?" I said to her under my breath. I think she heard me, because she squared her shoulders and went out. I tagged along.

It occurred to me that it was all very well to put on this show for her, but I was damn lucky that I'd picked her to pull it on rather than some more impressionable female. The place was getting under my skin as it was. Suppose I'd been with some twist who fainted or got hysterical or lost or something? Suppose I got left alone in this place? I began stepping on Miriam's heels.

We gave the rest of the second floor the once-over and nothing much happened. That pep talk of hers helped a lot. We casually dismissed sundry creaks and groans and rattlings as the wind in the chimneys, banging shutters, and settling floors. Neither of us saw fit to mention that there was no wind that night, and that a one-hundred-twenty-five-year-old house does not settle. In other words, we thought that nothing was bothering us at all until that sob-laughing started up again. That was pretty awful. Miriam had been holding hands with me for ten minutes before I realized it, and I only knew it at all when I felt her bones grate together as I clutched her when the laughing started. It ran up and down a whole tone scale, sounding like a palsied madman playing on a piano full of tears.

"Still like it here?" I asked.

"I didn't like school," she said, "but I graduated."

We had to open a door to get on the stairs leading to the third floor. They were narrow with a turn in the middle, with a tiny square landing at the turn. I was in the lead—must have been a mistake, because you can bet I didn't ask for it, chivalry or no chivalry. Just before I reached the landing I saw a woman, a beautiful thing in diaphanous robes, walk gravely out of the wall at my right, across the landing and into the wall at my left. The only thing that detracted from her loveliness was the blood which spouted from her ears, and the fact that I could see the patchy wall through her quite easily. I gasped and stepped back on Miriam's instep.

"Oo-o! Dammit, Bill—" She stood on her uninjured foot and clutched at the banister, a section of which immediately broke loose and went crashing and somersaulting into the darkness below.

"You all right?" I said over the reverberations.

I clutched at her to keep her from falling and managed only to get my thumb into her eye. She said something that her mother didn't teach her. "Get away, Bill—you're a menace! What in the name of corruption did you step backward for?"

"Didn't you see her—it?" I said before I had sense enough to say nothing. She shook her head.

"Who?"

"A girl! She— Oh, skip it, Miriam. I guess I imagined that, too. Come on."

We started to climb again, and something possessed us both to look back. At any rate, when I looked, it was over Miriam's head, and she was staring at the transparent woman, who was crossing back again from wall to wall across the landing. This time she walked backward, and the blood ran into her ears. It was infinitely more horrible than the first time, and yet, after the first shock of it I was comforted. For the first time Tommy had laid it on too thick. That reversed action was too cinematic to get over, I thought. And that's what it must have been—a film projected from somewhere, perhaps out from under one of the steps, run forward and then backward. That would easily account for the transparency of the girl's figure, since it was projected directly against the wall. But—damn it, how did he ever achieve that astonishing three-dimensional effect?

"That," Miriam was saying brokenly, "is something that I just am not going to believe! Bill—for Heaven's sake, what sort of place is this?"

"Regular haunt, isn't it?" I said cheerfully. I was feeling better now that I'd figured out one of the ghosts

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really to my satisfaction. "Come on—we'll make our round and get out of here. The sooner the quicker, y' know!"

Her gait and her carriage and her expression, all I could catch in the sweeping beams of our torches, were almost meek. I suddenly felt overwhelmingly like a heel. This was a lousy thing to do to such a swell girl.

"Miriam," I said softly, catching her arms, "I—"

But just then the laughter reached a cold crescendo, and from downstairs came the most blood-freezing, ululating scream that it's ever been my sorrow to hear. It was the kind of sound to clamp a man's jaws so tight in terror that his gums bleed, and his skin goose-fleshes out like a wood rasp. The scream seemed to stop the laughter, for the stillness after it devoted itself to the scream's echoes; and we stopped breathing so that the sound of our breath would not keep the echoes alive. That scream didn't belong on this earth. Somewhere in hell is a damned soul which has been there long enough to be miserable enough and still stay strong enough to scream like that.

We pushed away from each other merely because it was the only movement we could make to thrust the remembrance of that sound from us a little. The desire to complete our tour of the chalet was something fevered and senseless and quite irresistible by now. We hurried to get it done—we made no slightest move to leave it partly finished. I couldn't have done it without my knowledge that no matter how extreme these horrors became, they were but the creations of Tommy's strange genius for handling electrical circuits. Miriam had her own iron nerve and the fact that so far I hadn't broken into a hysterical retreat.

THE THIRD FLOOR wasn't bad—there was nothing there but odds and ends of old furniture, dust, and creaking floorboards. When we started downstairs we knew we were all but on our way out, and we grew almost cheerful. Almost. Not quite, because that noise began again—that creeping, tear-filled laughter. It went on and on and on, until we couldn't stand it any more, and it passed that point and still went on. We walked down steps and trotted down corridors and broke and ran in and out of rooms, playing childishly at being casual, while the laughter grew, not louder, but more and more clear; and we couldn't tell whether it was following us or whether it was simply everywhere. It was so all-enveloping that we lost consciousness of the fact that it was in the house. It was all around us, more than a sound—it was something we breathed, something which pressed our clothing to our shrinking bodies with its pulsings. It filled the whole world and there would never, never be an end to it, and we couldn't escape it by fleeing the house. We couldn't ever get away from it. It was part of us now, in our blood, in our bones. Rounding a corner on the first floor, Miriam crashed into a door and reeled back into my arms. I turned my light on her face. Part of the sound—some of it, all of it, I don't know—*was coming from her!*

"Miriam!" I screamed, and slapped her face twice, and clamped my hand over her writhing mouth. The laughter receded into the upper part of the house; and she sank tremblingly closer to me. "Miriam— Why did I— Darling, come out of it. Listen to me! Mir—"

"Oh, Bill! Bill, I'm scared! I'm scared, Bill!" She said it quietly, in a

small, very surprised voice; and then she began to cry, and I'll bet my eyeballs that it was the first time in her life she'd cried, because those tears came hard.

I picked her up in my arms and carried her into a room we hadn't yet visited. There was a monstrous old red plush and mahogany divan there, and I put her down on it. She put her arms around my neck and all of a sudden was a very little girl afraid of the dark. I bent over her, all choked up, and for all I know, I cried, too.

The laughter approached again.

"Bill!" she wailed. "Make it stop! Oh, please, please, make it stop!"

I couldn't keep up that pretense any longer. "Stick around, bud," I gritted; and, jamming one of the torches in an angle of the divan's rococo, I headed for the door.

Miriam sat up and screamed for me. I went back, put my arms around her and kissed her. She was so surprised when I let her go that she just sat there with her hand to her mouth, wordless, while I tore out and along the corridor to the steps that led down into the cellar.

Tommy's carried this thing too damn far, I gritted to myself as I cut into the littered cellar room where he had hidden his controls. There was such a thing as doing a job too well, and I was about to tell a radio engineer that, complete with fireworks. I fumbled along the wooden partition until I found the knothole he had used for a doorknob. I jammed a finger into it, whipped the door open, stabbed a ray of light inside. There wasn't anyone there. There just wasn't anyone in there at all!

"Tommy?" I sagged up against the partition, gasping. "Tommy!" Nobody in there. No one working those lights, that switchboard, phonograph, no—"Tommy?" I quavered.

The laughter kept on. On and on. I looked at the phonograph. It was there, all right, with its crystal pick-up and the wires running to the speaker in the old furnace. But it wasn't operating. I crept up to it and put out my hand and turned it over with a crash, and the laughter wouldn't stop.

Tommy! The goon; where'd he get to? Maybe he'd been here up until a minute or so ago. Maybe he was hiding in the cellar somewhere. I went to the door and called him. No answer. I came back, ran my hand over the bulb-studded board. That sob-laughing was still sounding all around me. I wasn't doing it, was I? I shook my head to clear it and tried to think. Could that

foggy fellow have forgotten to show up? *Hadn't he been here at all?*

TUESDAY. Tuesday night. This was Tuesday night. Wasn't Tommy supposed to show up for the haunt tonight? That's what I thought. A vague memory flashed across my mind—Tommy telling me what night he wanted to pull his trick. He had gone, "Wuh-Wuh-Wuh-Wuh-Wuh—" for about thirty seconds before he got it out. But a guy doesn't make that noise when he's trying to say "Tuesday." He does it when he's trying to say "Wednesday." Oh, but that was too damn silly! Whatever in the world made me think it was Tuesday? I knew he'd said something about Tue— Oh, yes! "C-contact your snow queen on Tuesday so you'll be sure to have her at the house on Wuh-Wuh-Wuh—" That was it!

I punched myself in the mouth, I was so sore. Well, it didn't matter—some

son of a gun had been monkeying with these controls for the last hour or so, and I didn't care who it was! I rushed the beam over the wiring, located the power line and tore it away from the switchboard. That would do it.

That didn't do it. First I heard that laughter, and then I heard Miriam scream. I bolted for the door—straight for the door, even though it meant plowing through all of Tommy's electrical equipment. I hit the cellar room amid a shower of coils and broken bulbs and rheostats and headed for the stairs. As I reached them, another thought wound itself around my heart and tried to stop it. Miriam was in the first floor back room—the room into which I had carried her—the room where four people had been, inexplicably but thoroughly strangled!

I really made time. I was running too fast to get through the door clean, and I left a piece of my shoulder on the doorpost and kept running. This was it. This was our little haunt. That house didn't need Tommy!

Miriam was lying on the divan with her head twisted crazily and blue marks on her throat.

I screamed and whirled and ran out. A doctor—a policeman—I had to get someone! Miriam—I'd done this to Miriam! If she was dead, then I killed her!

I flew down the hall, out through the foyer. The outer door stopped me for a moment because it opened inward. I wrestled it open, stood gasping at the top of the steps. This was the way it was, then. This was what had happened to Grandt, and Fortunato had found Grandt as I found Miriam. Fortunato was lucky. He broke his neck running out of the house. I wished my

neck was broken, and then I wouldn't have to worry about killing Miriam. I looked hungrily down the steps. Three other men had died on them the same way—why not one more? The laughter behind me fell away and settled into a low, expectant gurgle. It was going to happen again. Strangle one person, and break another's neck on the steps. That's the way it always had been. That's the—

"No!" I sobbed, and turned and butted my way back into the house. When I did, the laughter stopped altogether, and that whole house seemed to die within itself.

I went blindly back down the long corridor and into the first floor back. Miriam still lay there, and I stood, all tired inside, looking at her. I didn't want to go near, didn't want to touch, didn't want anything. I just looked at her woodenly, the way she was stretched there and twisted, the way her head hung, and the way those blue marks on her long white neck bit in and shifted and bit again. And then I saw that she hadn't been strangled at all, for—*she was being strangled!*

With a hoarse bark I leaped in, seized her, lifted her. I had to pull against something. I propped her up with one arm, felt around her throat with the other hand. Nothing there! I picked her up and tried to carry her away, and I couldn't because she was being held by the neck! I clutched her to me and put everything I had into that effort to tear her away, and I couldn't! Then I felt something give, and her eyes rolled up out of sight. She looked ghastly in the crazy light from the torch that still flung its bright shaft angling upward from where I had jammed it. I knew it hurt her, and I could all but feel her pain. Then everything let go, and by a miracle I stayed on my feet, and I stumbled and bungled and carried her out of the room and out of the house and into the car.

As soon as we were well away from there I pulled over to the curb. She couldn't have lived through that—she couldn't! But why was she moving, then, and whispering something? I pulled her to me, chafed her wrist. She was saying my name. I almost laughed. She began to swear in a deep, husky voice. I did laugh.

"Oh—boy!" she said, and licked her lips. "Have I been through the mill!" She touched her neck weakly and grinned.

"Darling, I'm a heel to get you into that place. I don't know whatever got into me—"

"Shush," she said; and lay back.

She was so quiet for so long that I got frightened. "Miriam—"

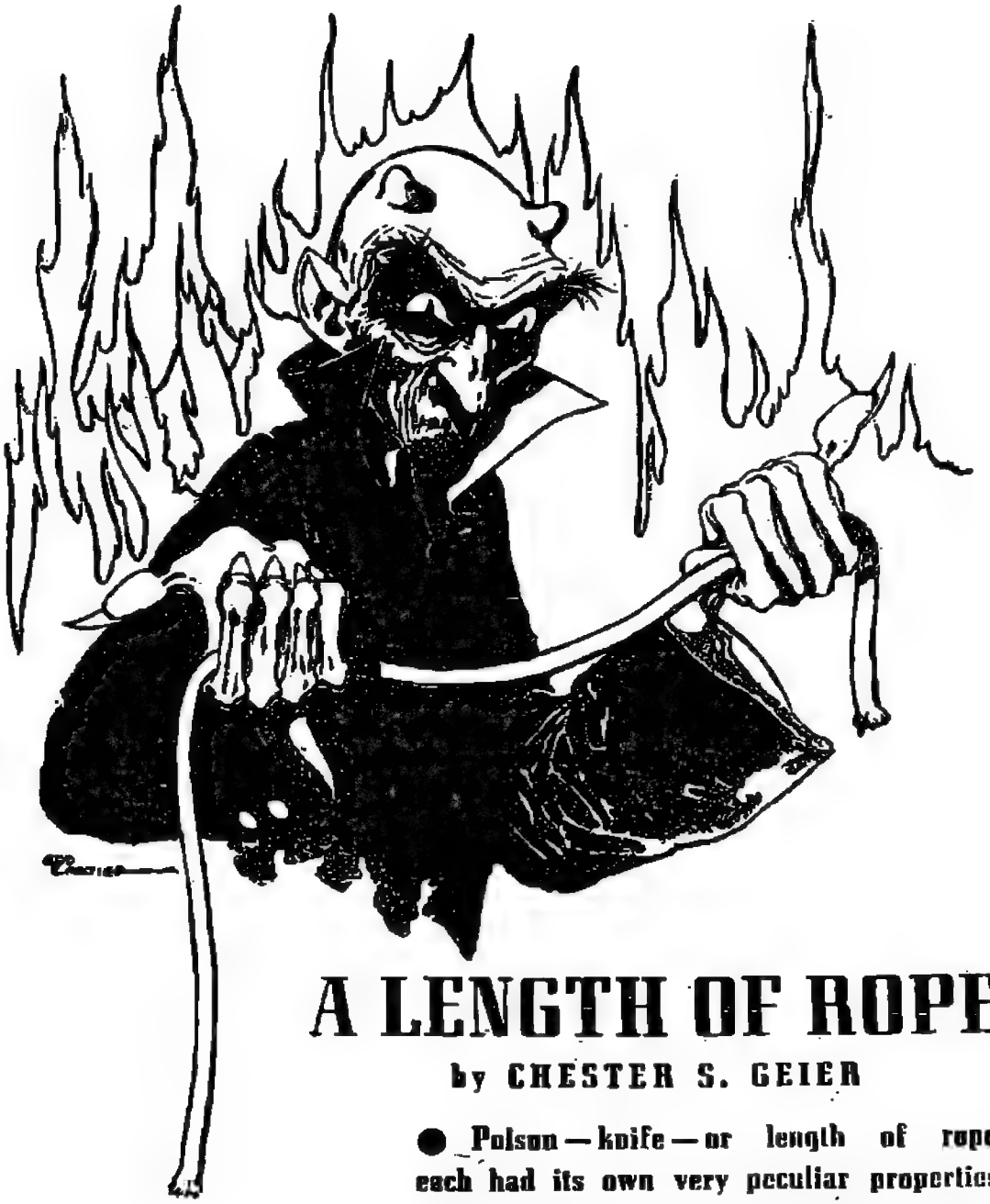
"Apropos of nothing," she said, and her voice was so strong and normal that it was a shock to me, "there's a question you asked me that I've been dodging. I'll marry you if you like."

I was still feeling like a heel. "What *for?*" I asked in real amazement. She leaned over against me.

"Because," she said softly, "I always wanted to be married to a man who could tell me ghost stories on long winter evenings."

There are just two more things to tell. Tommy refused to be our best man because he was sore at me for wrecking his equipment. The other thing is that I bought the chalet on Grove Street and had it razed. We built our house there and we're very happy in it.

THE END.



A LENGTH OF ROPE

by CHESTER S. GEIER

● Poison — knife — or length of rope, each had its own very peculiar properties, when given away by the little man—

Illustrated by Edd Cartier

He was small and wizened, and dressed in sooty black. Near him lay a derby hat which was hardly large enough to cover the stumps of the horns of his head. The emerald glow in his slit-pupiled eyes was dulled as he sat there deep in thought. He was staring at seven objects which hung from rusty nails in the stone wall.

The place he sat in could not be called a room, for it was much too large. Leaping flames from some source behind him threw grotesque patterns of fiery orange on

the stone walls. Yet the place was not warm. It was moist and chill—shadow-haunted.

Occasional spurts of the flames threw the seven objects on the wall into distinct relief. There was a golden goblet, a bronze dagger, a large, pink jewel, a silver chain, a ring of exotic design, a length of rope, and an ebony cane. After a long while of deep meditation, he took the length of rope down from its nail and studied it. In appearance it resembled an ordinary rope—but it was not an ordinary rope. A strand of something brightly red ran through its center.

As on each of the other objects, there was a tag fastened to the rope. He read the words printed on the tag.

DEATH BY STRANGULATION

Withdrawn	Recipient	Replaced
July 24, 1735	George Hornisby	Sept. 28, 1735
Feb. 6, 1809	Gertrude Larrimore	April 11, 1809
Dec. 14, 1871	Nathan Ordwinn	Feb. 16, 1872
May 2, 1919	James Gatlin	July 7, 1919

He decided to take the length of rope. It had not been in use as much as it should have, and, if he had judged potentialities correctly, it would make the most appropriate gift to the mortal who had saved his "life." He knew that the rope would be the death of that mortal and of some of the others who were a part of that mortal's environment. But he was not being intentionally cruel. Death was his business—and he could not forget his business even where gifts were concerned.

He rose, stuffing the length of rope into a pocket of his black suit. Then he placed the derby hat on his head. He pulled it down carefully, so that it would stay firm. The bright leaping of the flame dwindled to a dim flicker as he left.

THE WOODEN BEAM was not very heavy. But, then, Dennis Alford had never been a strong man. He was small and frail, and his narrow face was lined with a bitterness that refused to stay hidden. The muscles on his thin arms stood out like wire cords as he strained to hold the beam in position. His lips were pressed tightly together with the effort.

"Elaine!" he shouted. "Elaine! Hurry up, won't you?"

Alford's breath came in ragged gasps, and the pain in his arms was becoming unbearable. His thoughts were tinged with anger and regret. He realized now that he should never have attempted to save the money it would have cost to pay a carpenter by repairing the porch himself. At best, he was making a mess of the whole thing.

His wife's frightened, round face appeared below the banister upon which he stood. "I can't find a piece of wood that big!" she wailed.

Alford blew out his breath in exasperation. "Well, then saw one that big!" he roared. "I can't hold this thing up much longer." He muttered blackly as he shifted his body to a more comfortable position against the wall.

"Can I help you?" asked a voice near his knees.

Startled, Alford looked down, nearly losing his balance. The man who stood there was small and wizened, and dressed in sooty black. His derby hat seemed too large for his pinched face.

"You sure can—and thanks a lot," replied Alford. "I have to have a piece of wood to nail up against the wall here so I can rest this beam on it. Can you climb up and hold it?"

"That," smiled the stranger, "will not be necessary." From a pocket of his coat he pulled a length of rope.

Alford watched in bewilderment as the stranger grasped the vertical beam, and, with an agility which his appearance denied, hopped lightly to the banister. He tied the rope deftly about the crossbeam and the vertical beam upon which it rested. All was done in a moment. Alford felt the weight of the beam taken immediately from his arms.

He gasped as full understanding of what had been done struck into him.

One end of the heavy crossbeam was now fastened to the vertical beam by means of the rope. But the other end—the end which he had been holding—was entirely free! And the crossbeam remained horizontal, apparently defying all the laws of gravity!

"How in the world—" muttered Alford. Of a sudden he stiffened and stood gaping at the stranger, who had now hopped back down to the porch. "Say! Aren't you the fellow I pulled away from that truck?"

The stranger nodded brightly. "I am," he admitted. "Coincidence, isn't it?"

"I'll say it is!" rejoined Alford. He was swiftly becoming aware that there was something queer about the stranger. The stranger's eyes were a vivid green, and the pupils were slitlike and not round at all. The stranger's nose was a curving blade of flesh from his sallow face. His chin was almost a point.

Alford realized that he was staring. He blinked his eyes away, feeling acutely uncomfortable.

The stranger was smiling in a twisted, sardonic way. "You saved my life that day," he said. "I have not forgotten."

"It was nothing," disclaimed Alford. "I just happened to be behind you and saw the truck coming before you did, that's all."

"I meant to reward you then," said the stranger. "But you had disappeared in the crowd. For saving my life you may keep the rope. It has . . . ah . . . useful properties. Good day!"

And, before Alford could even think of saying anything, the stranger had briskly descended the steps of the porch and was walking rapidly down the street.

A curious conviction came to Alford. He stared after the stranger, and it seemed to him that the dwindling footsteps were a rhythmic *tap, tap, tap.* Like hoofs, he thought, recalling those weird green eyes. He shivered from a sudden chill in his back.

ALFORD was scowling absently at the beam, now supported miraculously by the rope, when his wife came hurrying from the yard.

"Here it is," she said breathlessly, extending the piece of wood she had just sawn. She stopped short, and her plump body went rigid as she noticed that Alford was no longer holding up the beam. "Why, how did you get it fastened?" she asked in surprise. She wanted to be angry, but did not quite dare.

Alford explained shortly, still gazing at the rope. "And don't look at me like that!" he finished. "Go on in the house and get dinner ready. This'll be all for today. I'll do the rest tomorrow." He snatched the piece of wood from her limp hand and very thoughtfully nailed it into position just under the loose end of the crossbeam.

After that was done he drove several nails through the crossbeam and into the vertical beam so that the two were joined securely. He then tried to loosen the rope which was bound around them, but it refused to come loose. He pried vigorously with the hammer. Yet the rope never so much as budged.

Angry and a little frightened, Alford pulled out his pocket knife. He began to saw at the strands of the rope. Minutes passed, and he was sweating, but the sharp blade did not even leave a dent in the rope.

He tried to swear away the empty feeling in his stomach and did not quite succeed. There was a new fear and a

great awe in his eyes as he stared at the rope. And then he noticed something which had hitherto escaped him—through the center of the rope ran a bright thread.

It appeared to be of metal, for it was red and glittering. Yet it was like no metal he had ever seen before. And he was a chemist. He touched it gingerly with the blade of his knife. At the contact a little shock darted up into his arm.

Frightened, he jerked back, and, losing his balance, had to jump to the porch. His face was white. A thousand wondering thoughts flitted through his head. He stood there until his wife called him in to dinner.

Her eyes were large and wide upon him while he ate. Their disturbing intensity, added to his unease, made him furious.

"Damn you!" he snarled. "Don't look at me like that. I don't know any more about the thing than you do!"

DENNIS ALFORD spent a restless, thought-pestered night, and when he appeared the next morning at the little chemical concern where he worked there were smudges of black under his eyes. Foreman Ansel Houk was devilishly pleased.

"Late again, huh?" he snapped. "What's the idea? Getting too lazy to even come to work?"

"I've told you before," replied Alford patiently, "the bus I take has to go slow because the road is being repaired along a four-mile stretch."

"Then why don't you get up earlier?" roared Houk.

A red mist surged before Alford's vision, and he wanted fiercely to hurl himself at Houk's throat. It was not the first time he had wanted to do that. He hated the foreman with an intensity all the more deadly because Houk was holding down the job he would have given his eyeteeth to have. Alford would have given anything to be foreman. It was the only ambition he had.

But he forced himself to keep his anger and resentment tightly in check. For, releasing it, he knew, would mean not only the loss of his job, but a sound beating at Houk's hands as well. Alford knew that he was no match for the brawny foreman. He had a gun at home, and the only reason he never used it was because he had doubts about the perfect crime.

Trying to still the trembling of his body, Alford said, "The buses arrive only at one-hour intervals. I have to get up early enough to catch the one I usually take."

Houk made an abrupt gesture. "None of your damned excuses! Get to work! The next time you're late, it's the chutes for you."

Seething with his enforced impotency, Alford stalked to the lockers. He felt tense and ill inside. As he shrugged quickly out of his coat, he noticed that there was an unaccustomed bulge in one pocket. But he was in too much of a hurry to investigate.

The day's work was dull and monotonous, as it usually was. Alford was so preoccupied with what had taken place on the previous day that he made several mistakes in his routine analytical tests. Houk was prompt with his tongue-lashings.

But that day was not like the days which had preceded it. For, at its close, Ansel Houk was found in his office—dead. He was a very disturbing sight to look at. There were purple welts around his neck. His eyes were bulg-

ing from their sockets, and his tongue hung down almost to the end of his chin.

The medical examiner who came with the police pronounced his death as due to strangulation—slow strangulation from some sort of rope. The instrument of death itself could not be found.

Every article of furniture in the office was dusted with fingerprint powder; samples of dust and lint were taken, and the body of Ansel Houk was photographed from several different angles. But that was as far as the police got. They took their disgust out on the men.

"Where was ya when the murder was committed?" one of the plain-clothes men thundered at Alford. It was Alford's turn.

"I was at my bench," replied Alford. He felt neither fear nor animosity toward his inquisitor. For Houk was dead, and he had had nothing to do with it. He was quite happy.

"Yeah?" snorted the detective suspiciously. He treated everyone suspiciously. Even his wife had doubts about her innocence when he was around. His name inappropriately enough, was Burdy, and his nose had been pushed snugly against his face at some time in the past.

"Where is your bench?"

Alford pointed: "Over there. No. 9."

"Couldn't sneak from there inta the stiff's office, could ya?"

"I don't think so. I'd have to pass Novack's bench. He'd see me."

"Ya hated his guts, didn't ya?"

"Nobody here liked him."

"All right!" barked the detective in desperation. "Why did ya do it?"

"I didn't," retorted Alford simply.

Burdy threw up his hands in resignation. "That's all! Next! You, there, with the whiskers."

Alford and the other men were held hours after the time they were supposed to have gone home. As a result, Alford had to wait for a long time before a bus came. To while away the minutes, he reached into a pocket of his coat for his package of cigarettes. It was then that he again became aware of the strange object stuffed in the pocket. He pulled it out.

It was a rope. No! It was *the* rope! In the light of the street lamp the thread of metal running through its center seemed to shine.

The bottom dropped out of his stomach.

When Alford reached home he dashed frantically up the stairs of the porch and clawed his way up on the banister. His fear-bright eyes sought the junction of the two beams where he had last seen the rope.

There was nothing there!

How had the rope gotten into his pocket?

Was it the rope which had been used to kill Houk? Instinctively he knew that it was.

Terror overwhelmed Alford so that he felt sick and weak. He sank down to the stairs and stared into the night. His thoughts were chaos.

He did not know how long he sat there before he recovered enough strength to go into the house. He gave his wife a diluted explanation of what had delayed him, more to keep her from thinking that he had gone crazy than to keep her from worrying.

After the police had given up the investigation as futile and things had settled down to something resembling their normal state, Frank Copeland, the owner of the plant, appointed Nils Ingvarrsen as the new foreman.

Alford was furious. Getting himself into control as much as possible, he went in to see Copeland.

"Mr. Copeland," he began, making a puzzled face. "I don't understand why you've appointed Ingvarrsen. You know that I've been slated for promotion for years now, but you've appointed Houk over me, and now Ingvarrsen. I've been with the company longer than either of them, and I know more about the work than they do."

Copeland looked uncomfortable. "Well, the truth of the matter is I don't believe you'd do well in that capacity. You're not the type. I want foremen who are tough and hard, who can keep the men working to their maximum point of efficiency. You—" Copeland trailed off, studying his hands.

"But, Mr. Copeland," pleaded Alford, "you've never given me a chance. Why, I can be as tough as anyone when it's necessary. And besides, I know the work, understand what has to be done as well as—"

"Too bad, Alford, but it's too late. I've already named Ingvarrsen. Tell you what I'll do, though. If something should happen to Ingvarrsen, I promise to give you a chance."

"Thank you, Mr. Copeland," muttered Alford. He left the office with the phrase, "If something should happen to Ingvarrsen," drumming through his head. If something should happen to Ingvarrsen— He had the rope—and the rope had killed Houk.

How had the rope killed Houk?—he wondered as he worked. Could the mysterious stranger have wielded it? But that was impossible. Why should the stranger commit murder for him just because he had saved his life? That the rope had strange properties he already knew. For how else could it have gotten into his pocket yesterday, and

With a bullet inside him, Joe Bandini laughed...

So did Duncan Firr, when he, too, was shot. What horrible death was this, that caused men to laugh . . and what dread conspiracy is behind these murders?

Caleb Horn, a chemist, gets to work—and finds himself smack up against a plot to undermine the United States' preparedness program. It's a fight to the finish against the unscrupulous cunning of the Fifth Column . . . and it involves a plan so desperate, so incredibly daring that it would have meant the finish of our army had it worked. . . .

THE MURDER MAKER, by Jack Storm, is the name of this super-thriller, book-length novel in the May

Mystery Magazine

10c A COPY AT ALL NEWSSTANDS

again today? Perhaps it had been activated by his concentrated hate. That smacked of magic, spirits, and hobgoblins. But in view of what he already knew about the rope, that seemed logical enough.

Now, if he was to hate Ingvarrsen with all the force that was possible, perhaps—perhaps the rope would kill again.

ON THE following day, just before the lunch hour, Copeland walked into Ingvarrsen's office with a sheaf of papers in his hand. Less than one second later there came a blood-chilling yell, and Copeland ran out of the office, his face a sickly green. There were no longer any papers in his hand.

"Ingvarrsen's dead!" he shrilled. "Choked to death!" He dashed into his office, scooped up the telephone and stammered out a call for the police.

This time Burdy was brightly interested. He scrutinized all the men, saying softly to himself, "Oh, boy! Oh, boy! Oh, boy!"

The medical examiner looked at Ingvarrsen and announced gravely, "Slow strangulation by means of a rope." He looked around for the rope, and was not surprised when he did not see it.

Burdy turned to his colleagues. "All right, boys, see if ya can scare up that rope. Go over these guys right down to the hair on their chests. Search the laboratory—benches and storeroom. Search the lockers, too."

Alford watched the proceeding, hardly daring to breathe. What if the rope was in his pocket? It must have returned there after doing its deadly work on Ingvarrsen— But, surprisingly enough, the rope was neither in the coat nor in the locker. It was as if it had obligingly remained away until the investigation was over.

At that moment Alford realized that the rope was controlled by his thoughts. "How useful!" he breathed, recalling a phrase of the stranger's. He no longer envied the power that dictators had.

The fingerprint expert dutifully retraced his former procedure. He was rather bored by the lack of incriminating prints. The photographer indifferently took pictures. And Burdy began grilling the men. His method, with occasional variations, was the same: "All right, why did ya do it? How did ya do it? Where did ya hide the rope? Come on, come clean!"

Alford felt almost hysterically lighthearted when his turn to be questioned came. The knowledge of the rope's abilities gave him an overwhelming sense of his immunity. He answered Burdy's monotonous questions without a tremor.

COPELAND toyed with a fountain pen before he ventured to look at Alford. His face had grown several new lines since the last murder, and he appeared to have lost some weight. When he did look at Alford it was only for a clipped second.

"Why, yes," he said at last, "I do remember my promise."

"Then you'll make me foreman?" asked Alford eagerly.

An indefinable something crept into Copeland's eyes. "Of course, you realize the danger. You know what happened to the other two. I'd hate to lose another man."

"I'm willing to take the chance, sir."

"Hm-m-m," said Copeland. "Well, I suppose you're familiar enough with the duties of a foreman. Your raise in pay starts immediately."

"Do you mean that I'm foreman? Oh, thank you, Mr. Copeland!" Alford's heart was very full. He had at last achieved a lifelong ambition.

Alford left the office patting the slight bulge in his pocket that was the rope. He surveyed the men in the laboratories with a possessive eye. They were his—his to snarl at.

"All right, Novack, come down to earth! You, there, Bartz, what do you think this is? A promenade hall? Get down to work! We've lost enough time fooling around with those cops."

Copeland, catching the sound of Alford's strident voice, licked his lips. The something which had crept into his eyes had found permanent shelter.

For two whole glorious months Alford lorded it over his former associates in the laboratories. And it was a credit to him that operations did not fall off. The men now hated him as wholeheartedly as they had Houk. As for Copeland, he was steadily losing weight over the fact that there was something he wanted to do very badly, but which he feared to do just as badly. Alford worried him.

Copeland began to drink, a thing he had promised his departed wife he would never do. One day, when he was so full of whiskey that he gurgled audibly when he walked, he did what he was not able to do while sober—he fired Alford.

"But, Mr. Copeland, I don't understand!" cried Alford. "I've been managing things as well as Houk and Ingvarrsen ever have. If you ask me, I've done better."

Copeland gazed steadily at the bottle on his desk. He hiccuped thoughtfully. "There'sh nushing to unnerstand. I shed you were fired. Pleash go way from me. Far, far away—"

"You don't know what you're doing, sir. You're not sober. Surely, if you were to give a little thought to the matter—"

"No!" shouted Copeland in a drunken frenzy. "No! I don' wanna think! Go way—you're fired."

Alford unconsciously touched one pocket of his coat. His lips were white from pressure, and his eyes were shiny. "Is this final?" he asked.

Copeland nodded gravely. "Final. Go way."

Alford stared at Copeland, not seeing him, but the ruins of the paradise in which he had been living. When he did see Copeland, he did not see Copeland's slack, pale face. He saw a corpse with lolling tongue and bulging eyes. Around the neck of that corpse were the marks of a rope. Abruptly Alford whirled and stalked out.

He did not miss the gloating looks of his former slaves as he went past them on his way to the lockers. He shot at each of them glances so full of feral hate and fury that they dropped their eyes and turned quickly back to their respective duties.

Alford ripped open his locker door so that it flew back with a ringing clatter. He pulled out several stained smocks, two pairs of rubber gloves, a pair of rubber overshoes, and an umbrella. He made an untidy bundle out of these. Then, very savagely, yet quite methodically, he tore out the extra glass apparatus that stood on the shelves and broke them one by one on the floor.

In a corner beer hall Alford drank himself into a condition roughly approximating Copeland's. It was only when he had vomited twice and lost all

hope of holding any more that he started home. A conscientious bartender had seen that he did not forget his bundle.

Alford's wife was shocked into quivering horror when she saw him. "Why, Denny, what on earth have you been doing?"

"Drinking!" screamed Alford. "I've been fired, do you hear? Fired!" He hurled the bundle at her. With her tears and wails echoing behind him, he staggered up the stairs to his room.

After turning on the light, he pulled the rope from his pocket and laid it on the bed. He sat down near it and watched the subtle play of color in the metal thread which ran through its center. Staring in fascination, he began to croon to it.

"He fired me, little ropey. He fired me—get that? I hate him, hate him, hate him! But you'll take care of everything for me, won't you, ropey, old pal? You'll slide around his neck and choke him slow—oh, so slow!" Alford chuckled sleepily, yet none the less sadistically. "You'll get him for me, old pal—" He slumped back on the bed. He was sleeping.

THE NOISE of an authoritative pounding on his bedroom door awakened Alford the next morning. He glanced automatically at the clock on a small table. The movement sent fierce pains rocketing through his head. It was eleven fifteen.

"All right, come on out!" yelled a harsh voice that he recognized as Burdy's. The police! In a flash everything came back to him. Copeland!

"We got the goods on ya this time," continued Burdy loudly. "The old gent left a letter behind him. His lawyer gave it ta us. In this letter he says as how he suspected ya, and if anything was ta happen ta him, we was ta nab ya quick. Tha evidence has got ya sewed up tighter than a bug in a rug. Come on out or we bust this door down!"

Over all rose the sound of his wife's hysterical sobbing.

Alford's head was suddenly clear. The stringy muscles of his body were tensed. He moistened his lips, and his eyes, shot with a red gleam, darted about the room. The window!

In a wild scurry he was through it, glass and all. He landed in a quivering heap on the kitchen porch, blood oozing from a long gash on one cheek. He streaked down a supporting beam, over the fence, and through the alley.

Behind him, whistles shrilled and voices shouted. There followed the sharp reports of revolver shots. Then there was the slapping of pursuing feet.

Alford ran like a madman. He ran until it seemed everything ran with him. Escape was a poignant desire in his mind, terror an icy hand on his heart.

Everything was noise and confusion. The air seemed to roar and vibrate. Objects whirled crazily before Alford's eyes. He stumbled and fell repeatedly, until his hands and knees were bloody ruins from the sharp glass and rock fragments of the lot he was crossing.

Panting, exhausted, he reached his sanctuary, an old ruined building which had once been a factory. Alford scrambled through a sagging window in which no trace of glass remained. Sobbing, he stumbled over the litter which covered the floors. His lungs burned like fire, and outlines were red and hazy before his eyes. He fought his way up decaying stairs, slipping and sliding over broken plaster and rotting lathes.

At last he could go no farther. The stairs had ended. He was in a little room, lighted only by the slanting rays of sunlight which poured in through cracks in the walls and ceiling. He sank gasping to the floor.

Below him, cars ground to a stop. The yelling of excited voices grew in volume. Through it all came Burdy's harsh bellow:

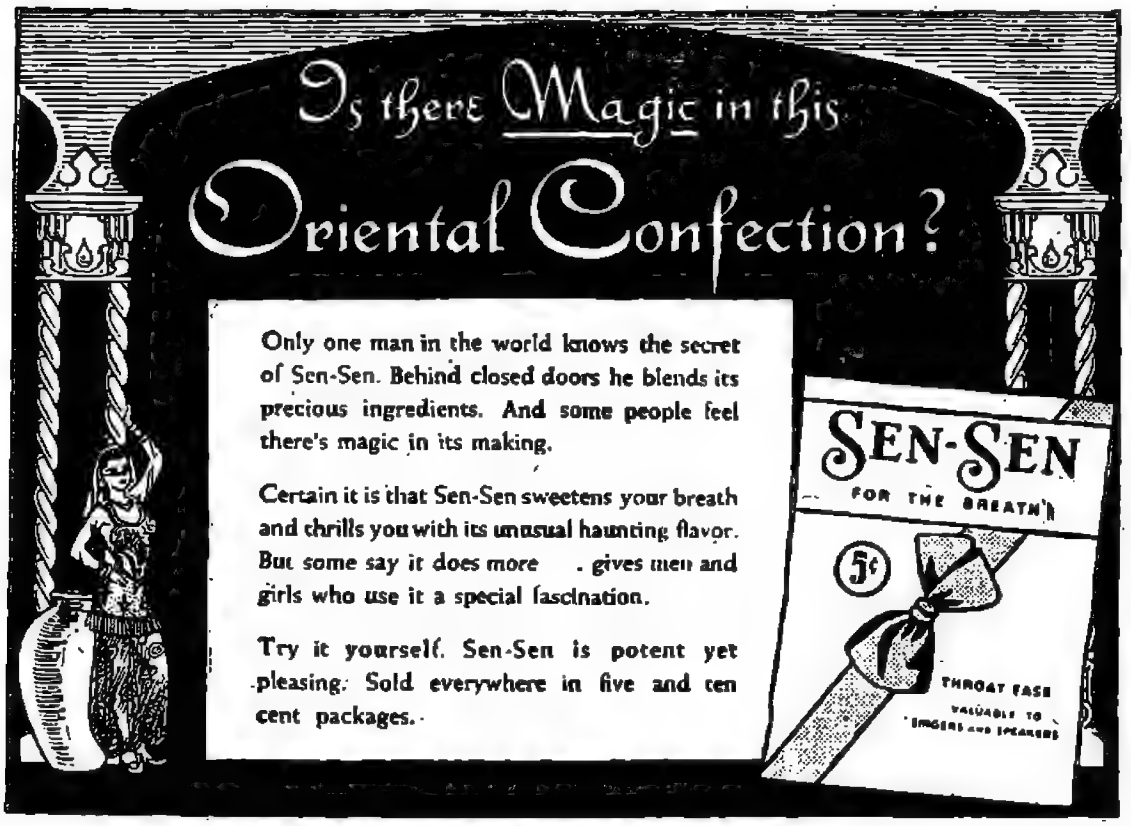
"Got ya surrounded! Sewed up! Come down with your hands raised or we'll riddle ya! I'll count to ten. One, two, three—"

As he stared unseeingly before him, Alford had a momentary vision of the stranger's weird green eyes. They were eager. He felt into a pocket of his coat. It was there.

He rose, weak and tottering, and walked across the room to where an open trapdoor gaped in the floor. He looked at it. He swallowed. Then he began searching among the litter on the floor. At last he found it—a thick piece of wood just long enough.

Alford tied one end of the rope to the piece of wood. He knotted the other end around his neck. It was going to be simple. He would be his own hangman. The trapdoor, with the piece of wood thrown across it, made an excellent scaffold.

He got the rope tied securely around his neck and was all prepared when Burdy reached nine. But it was not necessary for him to jump. The rope was obliging—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THROAT EASE

THE FORBIDDEN TRAIL

by JANE RICE

● The trail was very taboo; the natives had better sense than to follow it. The explorers, though, knew better—

I SIGNED the bar check, picked the frosted silver goblet off the tray, my fingers leaving smudgy highways among the beaded wetness, and nibbled one of the sugared mint leaves experimentally.

"Hm-m-m," I said with appreciative approval.

"Dat'll put a kink in youah hair, Mistah Rutherf'd." Sam gave me a toothy grin, took the proffered half dollar, polished it on his sleeve and pocketed it—also with appreciative approval.

"Yass *suh*, boss," he said emphatically and walked away, thumping his tray happily.

Scrounging down on the back of my neck, I lifted the julep in the direction of the open window, with its panoramic view of lower Manhattan and quoth, "Here's to New York. Good, old New York." I drank deeply. A delicious sensation passed along my alimentary canal.

"Ahh-h-h-h-h," I sighed in a long drawn-out exhalation of peace and contentment.

"Holy jumping catfish!" a voice squawked behind me. "As I live and breathe, Tarzan of the Apes! Tony Rutherford! When did you get back?"

My first impulse was to get down on my hands and knees and crawl under the rug; in fact, I think I would've on my second impulse, too, if I hadn't been so busy preserving not only by own equilibrium but that of my glass while undergoing a succession of thwacks on my vertebrae that felt as if they were being delivered with the flat of a meat ax. But they were, as I knew, administered by Allan Pomeroy. Those zestful, outdoorsy accents and the subsequent pummeling could have been authored by but one person—the club bore.

"Hold it, and sit down and I'll listen to how you could've won the tennis tournament if—" I said patiently and not too grammatically.

Pomeroy came round and perched athletically on the arm of a chair. Rangy, good-looking in a curly-haired, sunburned way, with eyes the color of, and with just about as much depth as, a Dresden china doll's.

"Mag home, too?" he asked.

Mag. I must remember to tell Meg. Nothing made her madder than to be called "Mag"—like a witch with poisoned apples, or a swaybacked mare with its ears poking out of a straw hat, she'd say, stamping her size 3B pumps.

"No," I replied wearily; "I traded her to a Maisai tribesman for a bolt of calico and a cotton umbrella. And it's *Meg*."

For a moment Pomeroy's blue eyes grew very wide and then he chirruped brightly, "Oh, you're pulling my leg.

The webs were flimsy, enough, a barrier more mental than physical—

A bolt of calico . . . oh, I say, that's very good," and he burst into roars of laughter while I sipped my drink and tried mental telepathy—go away—go away—go away—go away.

"Whose pictures did you take this time?" he queried, having with an immense effort subsided. "Monsieur Lion? Madame Tiger? Frau Hippopotamus?"

"I didn't bring back any pictures," I said.

"Nothing!"

"Nothing."

"Oh, come now, Rutherford, you're holding out on me. Whatever it is it

must be a dinger. You didn't trek through the Liberian wilderness without clicking a lens."

"Nothing," I said.

"Empty-handed?"

"Empty-handed."

"Not even a unicorn or a couple of albino gorillas?"

"No."

"You *are* holding out on me. Must be spectacular." Allan wrinkled his forehead in musing concentration. "It wasn't by any chance a zombie, was it? An authentic dyed-in-the-wool zombie with a brass nose ring and bones in its hair? I've always wanted to see a picture of a zombie. Such scrumptious horror appeal. How's about it? Any zombie snaps?"

And, all at once, I was back in that God-forsaken clearing with the silence thick as guava paste and the creepers twining over everything like sightless green snakes and the dusk closing in, a purple shroud, over the thatched roofs of that deserted Guere village.

"Nothing," I repeated doggedly.

"No zombies," Allan said sadly.

"No," I said hoarsely.

Allan sat up and observed me intently. "Ah-ha," he said, "I'm on the right track." He smacked his palms together and said waggishly, "I've got it. You brought one back alive à la Frank Buck. You defied the immigration authorities. You probably stuffed him in the bottom of your trunk under a mess of collapsible canoes and things to get him by the officials without a passport and now you're going to spring him on—"

"I'll tell you what I brought back," I interrupted him savagely. "I brought back my sanity. Now for the love of God, leave me alone. LEAVE ME ALONE."

Allan gawped at me as if I had suddenly sprouted horns and cloven feet and, as I got in several more violent leave-me-alones in rapid succession, he stammered a phrase about something or other in the locker room and made a hasty exit.

I RESUMED my julep sipping and gazed morosely out the window. But the julep tasted as though it had been concocted with woodash instead of bourbon and the skyscrapers seemed to have moved closer together, as if seeking protection from the very sky they strived to pierce, and even it appeared less cerulean. A boat edged up the Hudson, fearfully, it seemed to me, as if peering over its shouldered scarf of smoke belching from a red funnel. And the smoke itself looked frightened, dissipating as quickly as possible in tattered yellow streamers. Yellow as a dead man's face. A dead man who wasn't dead. And who wasn't alive. And whose features had the flabby colorlessness of a bled pig. With a muttered curse, I banged the unfinished drink down on the table, jammed on my hat and clumped out.

I told Meg about it over dinner and Meg crinkled her pug of a nose at me until the freckles ran together like golden-brown waffle crumbs and said, "You might as well face Tony. You're scared."

"Scared!" I ejaculated. "Me?"

"You," she answered, surveying me levelly over a forkful of mashed potatoes. "Scared. S-c-a-r-e-d—scared." She plopped the potatoes in her mouth and chewed them ruminatively. "The trouble with you is, m'love, you have a mathematical mind. To your way of thinking, two and two make four. Always has. Always will. And when,

like a bolt from the blue, two and two add up to six, or eight, or a minus thirteen, you get the screaming meemies even if you won't admit it.

"Now, me," she went on insouciantly, "I have an imaginative mind. I'm gullible. If Minnie came in and said, 'There's a goblin in the garden, Mrs. Rutherford,' I'd say, 'Well, give it some porridge and see that the cat doesn't bother it.' You'd say, 'Don't be absurd!'"

"But it *would* be absurd," I began, "and, besides, I'm not talking about goblins. I'm talking about Murchison and those those the the—"

"I'm not talking about goblins, either, darling," Meg broke in. "Not really. I'm talking about your mind. It's all shut up tight like a little locked box with something horrible in it. And the longer the box remains sealed the more hideous that something is going to become, until after a while people will begin to whisper, 'What's wrong with Tony? Has Rutherford gone off his bat? Unsociable devil and such a swe-e-e-e-et wife.'" Meg made a moue at me and started on her salad.

"But, Meg, there's no such thing as as a as what we saw!"

Meg put down her fork and faced me squarely.

"There's no such thing as a dodo," she said, "or a dinosaur, or a land called Atlantis, but once there was. And I haven't the slightest doubt that when Lazarus was raised from the dead, there were any number of intelligent souls that rent their garments and ran about with ashes on their heads, vowing never again to guzzle gin slings or their biblical equivalents.

"Now you're certainly aware Liberia is no Forty-second Street. Civilization hasn't even made a nick in it. It's hot, steaming, fertile jungle. It's tom-toms and witch doctors and grigris. It is, I think, like the earth when the earth was young and hadn't begun to cool and crack and settle down to a smooth rotation on its axis." She gave me a beseeching glance. "You *do* follow me?"

"I'm trying."

"Well, who are we to deny the presence of powers, heretofore unknown to us, that may exist, possibly have existed since the beginning of time, in this last far-flung outpost of of virgin world? You know, yourself, that if Wahla, black scamp that he was, God love him, saw a neon sign, he'd have a hissy. Look at our bearers. How terrified they were of our phonograph, at first. Wahla threw himself flat, remember, and Dmigne drew a symbol in the dust as a sort of protective cabalistic barrier between him and the machine, while the rest of the tribe took to their heels and had to be coaxed back with beads and mirrors and gewgaws. It works both ways. Why should we refuse to believe certain astounding facts that *they* accepted?"

"Meg, do you honestly think that Langdon was capable of giving life back to the dead?" I asked.

There was a long pause while Meg stirred her coffee around and around so that it had a miniature whirlpool in the center.

"I don't think anything," she said at last, resting the spoon in the saucer. "That is, I'm not casting my vote in favor of the ayes or nays. All I know is that, for some reason, all the wild life had vanished beyond that Forbidden Trail, and that Langdon was mad, stark, staring mad and that Murchison, or the thing we called Murchison, had the

bony, segmented limbs of a skeleton. That's all I actually *know.*

Minnie came in with some hot rolls.

"Mr. Rutherford," she clucked reprovingly, eying my plate, "you ain' et a thing. Not airy thing."

"Thunderation!" I bellowed at her. "That's all I hear. You ain' et a thing. Morning, noon, and night, I ain' et a thing and, furthermore, I *ain'* going to. You take care of the kitchen, I'll take care of my diet!"

Minnie thumped the rolls down on the table and, with prim lips and switching skirt, flounced pantryward.

"You see," Meg said, when the door had stopped swinging, "you've got as pretty a case of jitters as ever I saw. If you keep this up, in another month you'll be doing occupational therapy and bleating stuff like hehehewahanojibber jibberjibber to a bunch of white-coated orderlies at Bellevue."

"All right," I gritted, "what do I do about it?"

"If I were you, darling," Meg said, taking up where she had left off on the potatoes, "I'd write it down with pen and ink and, after I was sure all the i's were dotted and the t's were crossed, I'd read it over thoroughly and then put it in the bottom of the cedar chest, along with your high-school diploma and the picture of the basketball team and that old pair of sculling oars." Meg's countenance lighted with a seraphic smile and her eyes got that sort of distant, hazy expression in them that makes all males past the stage of three-cornered pants palpitate visibly, and which usually means her mental machinery is all set to pop a piston.

"On second thought," she said dreamily, "whyn't you make a story of it, say around ten thousand words, and send it in to a magazine? There's a flame chiffon, with yards and yards of frilly skirt and the cutest sequined bolero in a shop uptown, and I think it's worth about ten thousand words. Maybe, you'd better make it twelve thousand to be on the safe side." She beamed at me and I melted like so much warm butter and beamed back.

"You," I chuckled, "are a lulu. You are a beautiful, gorgeous hunk of luluness. You are the original La Belle Dame Sans Merci. And, if I know you, the flame chiffon is only a come-on for a black velvet wrap, with ermine tails and one of those do-funnys that hang down like a limp hat in back."

"Why, Tone-e-e-ey," Meg said reproachfully, letting me have the complete battery of those violet eyes full strength.

"WE OUGHT to be there soon, oughtn't we?" Meg slapped at a mosquito and pushed up her helmet to mop her forehead, pearled with drops of sweat and plastered with damply curling tendrils of taffy hair. "These mosquitoes certainly have the will to succeed, haven't they?"

"Right you are about both things," I said. "The mosquitoes are practically carnivores and here comes Wahla springing along on the balls of his feet and dripping importance. He's sighted the government compound."

Wahla had. I'll spare you the italicized gibberish that, as a rule, runs rampant through most jungliographies. You know the kind of thing. Wahla, my Swahili boy, cried excitedly, *"Idyen keyna ollan mayre olketyi yo!"* As a matter of fact, that's exactly what Wahla cried, and it meant the compound was about three hours distant. But from now on, you and Wahla and I are going to talk in English and nuts with

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The skeletal thing could still talk. "Get out. Get—away before—he starts—" it mumbled.

all this tribal-language folderol. It'd have to be translated, anyway, so why bother with it? If you're interested in learning to speak Swahili, come around any afternoon between four and four-five and I'll teach it to you. Really, the only words you have to know in any language are—water, food, stop, go, and help.

Sure enough, we sighted the com-

pound not long after and evidently news of our approach had filtered through in some inexplicable manner, for we were met by a band of chattering black children, most of them naked as the day they were born, with round, bulging stomachs and eyes as bright and shiny as bilberries. The elders greeted us more gravely, nodding and bowing and, when they thought we weren't noticing, poking our paraphernalia with skinny inquisitorial fingers.

Colonel Mayhew was hospitality itself. Meg and I have trekked around in out of the way places long enough to know that these guardians of territorial outposts, hacked bodily from the ever-threatening jungle, are tickled silly to see white faces and to hear Anglicized voices. But, somehow, Mayhew was too effusive. Like a child, whose departure up a dark and gloomy stairwell to bed is delayed by the arrival of company—or, as Meg put it, whose "company" does his arithmetic problems for him.

Which hit the nail right spang on the noggin. Because it developed, over the rice and curried chicken, that Colonel Mayhew wanted us to investigate an incident, a rather odd incident, concerning his assistant Murchison and also a man named Langdon who had a rubber plantation adjacent to the Cavally River. For some unknown reason the blacks in the Bandigara section had fled their villages on the Cavally and Murchison, getting wind of it, had gone to see Langdon who, so Colonel Mayhew said, was apparently the cause of the general exodus. Murchison had left a fortnight ago and Murchison had neither returned nor sent a message which, I gathered, was extremely un-Murchisony.

"But we're en route to Grand Bassam on the Ivory Coast," I demurred. "That's directly away from the Cavally River."

The colonel refilled my cup with palm wine and said he had heard there were some extremely fine panthers in the Bandigara section.

We had enough panther pictures, I said. We were, you might say, panther poor.

And how were we fixed on hamadryads, the colonel inquired.

Reptiles didn't go over so well, I explained. Not in America, anyway. Americans wanted orangutans, and bull elephants, and wild dogs, and lions, and native ceremonies, and bushmen, and head hunters, and queer tribes with decorated jowls and such.

How did Americans react to cannibals?

Just as they reacted to saber-toothed tigers, I replied. Good stuff, but extinct.

I knew, of course, the Bandigara section was peopled with Guere?

Sure, I said, and so what? Since the government had taken over, there hadn't been a roast "long pig" in twenty years. Nowadays, what meat the Gueres ate came from rope snares or out of government tins.

But, didn't I think it odd the warlike Gueres were fleeing their villages? They had, so he had been told, even erected a forbidden barrier leading into their sector as a warning to others.

Well, I said, swigging my wine, it might be odd and then again it mightn't. Perhaps this Captain Langdon believed in a rawhide whip in lieu of pay. Some of those rubber fellows were the devil's own brood. Usually wound up with a staved-in skull, or had their heads nicely shrunk for hanging in a chieftain's hut.

Then, I wouldn't be interested?

Emphatically not. No hard feelings or anything, but, in my opinion, the Gueres weren't born yesterday. If cannabalism was being practiced on the sly, all they had to do was report it and the government would land on the offenders like a Mills bomb. And the Gueres knew it. Nope, the colonel could take it from me, Langdon was pulling some sort of shenanigans. Give him plenty of rope, I said sententiously, tilting my chair on its two back legs, and the Gueres would see he got throttled with it.

AT THIS JUNCTURE, Meg spoke up in a sweet voice and said, "Now zombies would be a different story, Colonel Mayhew. The Americans just *love* zombies. They even have a cocktail named The Zombie. Three of them and you don't know whether you're dead or alive—or care. There wouldn't, by some quirk of circumstance, be any zombies in Bandigara, would there?"

The colonel choked, sprayed a gulp of palm wine all over the front of his linen coat, snorted, had to be pounded on the back, caught his breath, wheezed mightily, coughed and said through a frog in his throat, "I wasn't going to mention it, but since you brought it up" —he wiped his brimming eyes—"that's the crux of the situation."

"No!" Meg said, and the surprise was so thick I looked at her suspiciously. Meg is *never* surprised about anything.

"Zombies?" I said incredulously.

"Zombies," Colonel Mayhew echoed soberly, "leastways that's the tale that's filtered in to us."

"You don't believe it!"

"I don't know," he said slowly. "I don't know."

"Have you seen any?"

"No-o-o-o. But the blacks have the wind up pretty badly. And the Gueres are a fearless lot. They'd stick anything. Except death. That kind of death. Walking death."

"But, man alive, that's incredible. There's no such thing as a zombie. It's the prime native ghost story, that's all. The choice cut, as it were. They tell of zombies as we tell of women in white, rattling chains, and wall tapping."

"I'm not so sure, Rutherford. If it were one zombie or two, I wouldn't be so apt to credit it. From what I hear, there's supposed to be a whole village of them."

"A whole village!"

"Yes."

"Poppycock. There's been an epidemic of catalepsy or something. A whole village of zombies," I hooted.

The colonel flushed. "Murchison thought it was funny, too. He left here laughing his head off at me for being an old woman." The colonel held his cup at the level of his eyes and regarded it somberly. "And Murchison hasn't come back."

"Oh, see here," I interposed hurriedly, "I didn't mean to intimate you had swallowed an old tale, hook, line, and sinker. If I thought for a moment I could get a reel of a zombie, just one, I'd be off like a shot. But I don't think there—"

"Rutherford," Mayhew said, "I give you my word that something out of the ordinary is happening on Langdon's plantation. Something that is beyond mortal understanding. And *I* think it's zombies. Take it or leave it."

The silence lengthened and grew around the table. The fragrance of frangipani was borne in on the night breeze and somewhere, away in the tangle of jungle beyond the stockade, a wah wah began its haunting, plaintive

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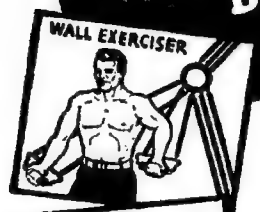

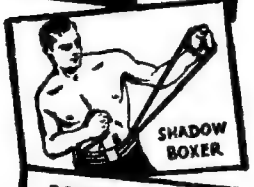

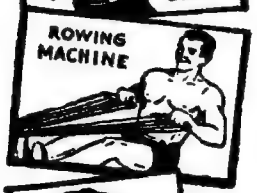

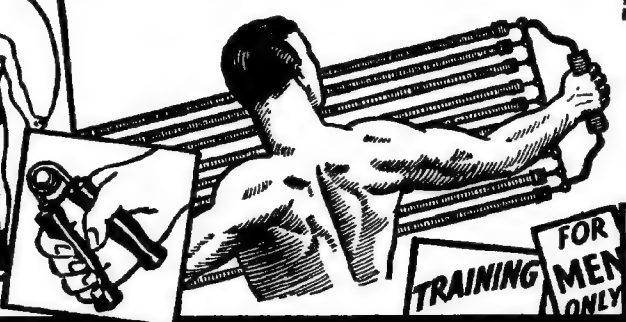

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song. A black rhinoceros beetle bumped its head against the lamp, its frustrated buzz sounding unnaturally loud in the stillness.

I let my chair down with a thud and said, "I'll take it."

"Stout fella," Mayhew said and filled my cup to the top.

"To Bandigara."

"To Bandigara." I drank and smashed my cup against the wall and instantly felt like a melodramatic idiot.

There was a second smash. Meg had thrown hers.

"I've always hankered to do that," she said and added wistfully, looking at my jersey. "I wish Dartmouth had had old school ties."

We got under way early the next morning after a hearty breakfast that would have done justice to a mob of Kansas field hands during the wheat harvest. Mayhew saw us off with much joviality and hearty handshaking, but below his bushy brows, his eyes weren't jovial and he passed up breakfast, saying he'd eaten earlier, which was an out-and-out lie, as I'd seen his cook laying the fire in the godown not twenty minutes before the breakfast gong rang. Incidentally, the cook, a mixture of Irrut and Swahili, had seen *me* and had dropped his bundle of sticks and had beaten a Paavo Nurmi exit out the back door. He hadn't served us, either. The meal was all laid out on tin plates and waiting for us and, though Mayhew beat the gong and even stomped out in the kitchen, making a splendid noise in his English boots, we served ourselves. Mayhew was most apologetic and said the cook hadn't been feeling well, too much rice beer, and the other servants had gone to the fields early. But we weren't fooled. They knew where we were heading for and they wanted none of us.

This became quite apparent when we left. For the compound was empty. Far from being on deck to receive the bounty that it is customary for "guests" to bestow on their departure, the blacks were nowhere in evidence. True, one ebony tike, with a fat little paunch like a dusky tub of butter, came dashing out of a doorway, his chunky hands outstretched greedily for baksheesh but, before he'd gotten more than two paces in our direction, his mother hove into view behind him, fetched him a looping clout on the ear and bore him wailing back into the hut.

Mayhew tried to prevail on Meg to stay behind. And Meg said "Ha."

We turned at the bend and waved at Mayhew, who gave us a military salute.

"There ought to be a bugler blowing taps," Meg said. Only, somehow, it didn't sound very funny.

Our Swahilis remained as impassive as ever, but for the first time in many moons, Wahla didn't sing. It was his wont to trot along the line of safari, chanting in a singsong voice: "Move, you white-tailed baboon, you liverless hyena, you blistered he dog with the legs of a kangaroo, move, move, before the anger of the white Tuan shrivels your skins, move, hiyeh!" The song varied and at some points I venture to say it would have brought a blush to the jaded cheek of a habitué of Montparnasse. Meg and I delighted in it. But, that day Wahla trudged along like a deaf mute. If we were at the head of march, Wahla tagged in the rear and, if we waited and swung in behind, he unobtrusively pushed on ahead. Once I stayed behind and sent Meg ahead and Wahla quietly idled until he had slipped halfway between. It was disturbing and

yet it whetted my insatiable appetite for the mysterious. For I felt that Wahla had an inkling of what lay before us and that he was expressing his misgivings as politely as possible.

His disquiet and unease had penetrated through to the Swahilis by camp time and, contrary to their usual habit of gathering in a circle after supper for chit chat or pebble throws, they withdrew and sat in clumps of three and four, silent and apparently communicating by mental telepathy. At least so far as I could ascertain, nobody said anything and yet, shortly six of them had, so they lamented, developed horrendous internal symptoms and begged to be dismissed. I gave the six castor oil and soothed them down as best I could.

In the morning they were gone.

By nightfall of the next day, ten more pleaded extreme illness and one, the sole bearer with a spark of imagination, exhibited a mashed toe that prevented his walking a step farther and couldn't possibly have been mashed by anything other than a deliberate pounding with our iron skillet.

After we made camp and were fed, Meg and I went into a huddle. It was obvious we couldn't continue on with dissatisfaction running rampant through the porters and those porters intent on getting back to where they'd started from as quickly as possible. We decided to take one camera and sufficient food to last a week. Get Wahla to hand pick two reliable bearers to carry the supplies and allow the remainder to go on to Grand Bassam under the wing of Wahla's "second lieutenant," Dmigne. Dmigne being given our victrola, for which his admiration was intense, to insure the safe arrival of our equipage at the post.

This being agreed, we called in Wahla and explained the situation to him. Wahla was as inscrutable as a basilisk and told us gently that the signs and portents were unfavorable.

"Bosh," I said, only in Swahili and a whole paragraph of it.

"Muungu," Wahla insisted, "blew the wood smoke close to the ground which was an infallible omen of ill luck."

"Muungu was just blowing a little hard," I said.

Wahla shrugged and gazed at us with blank eyes, and popped his ankles, and spat betel juice with unerring accuracy through the tent flap.

Meg said, "All right, what do *you* want? Dmigne gets the victrola."

Wahla's expression immediately became suffused with animation and he said elaborately and at great length that, while Muungu was god of the fetishes and was all-powerful and while he wouldn't cast aspersions on Muungu for anything and hoped Muungu wouldn't misinterpret what he was about to say, that I, the white Tuan, had powerful grigris. Namely, the mirror, clear as water, that made big of little, and the watch that does not tick but tells where the true path lies.

"He means the magnifying glass and the compass," I said to Meg. "We need the compass, so we'll give him the glass" and started to say "all right" when Meg stopped me.

"Maybe, we'd better give him the compass," she said haltingly and did her darnedest to override my protestations.

After much arguing, back and forth, about the importance of the compass and its indispensability, I finally got it out of Meg that she had given the magnifying glass to Mayhew's house boy.

"Why!" I said, "why, in the name

of Merry Christmas, did you have to give the glass? Why didn't you give one of those tin flashlights? God knows we have a trunkful of them. You *know* Wahla has had his eye on that glass since we entered Liberia. You *know* he thinks that and the compass are potent magic. You *know*—"

"I know it's not going to do any good to rant about it," Meg said. "Give him the compass. He'll be with us, so it won't make any difference."

"But why did—"

"Because he wanted it," Meg said exasperatedly. "My goodness, we'd never have heard about those zombies if I hadn't lugged them in to the conversation by main force. You'd have had us in Grand Bassam snug as bugs in a rug, with all those zombies cluttering up Bandigara, and a swell opportunity shot to hell."

"You gave Mayhew's house boy the glass as a bribe to tell you exactly what was going on among the Gueres?"

"Yes."

"Then you knew all along."

"Yes."

"Why didn't you say so?"

"Because I've been your bridge partner often enough to know that a two forcing bid from me makes you sit and sniggle like an inmate of a feeble-minded institution, but that if somebody else makes a two forcing bid, you'll jump in feet first, determined to get the bid or bust. So far, you haven't busted."

Wahla got the compass.

THE FOLLOWING morning we bade good-by to Dmigne and the porters, saw them on their way and then we set forth, Meg and I, two huskies, their necks straight with balancing haversacks on their kinky craniums, and Wahla proudly leading the decimated parade, the compass slung under his arm in true grigris fashion.

We made swift progress, unhampered as we were by superfluous baggage. Overhead, the sun seemed to hang stationary, a glowing, brassy ball in an inverted blue bowl. Several times we passed close enough to zebra to catch a whiff of their horsy smell, which never ceases to amaze me, and twice we caught glimpses of giraffe and saw two rhinoceros evidently lost in some rapt prehistoric memory of their own, as oblivious to us as they were to the tick birds pecking daintily at their armored exteriors.

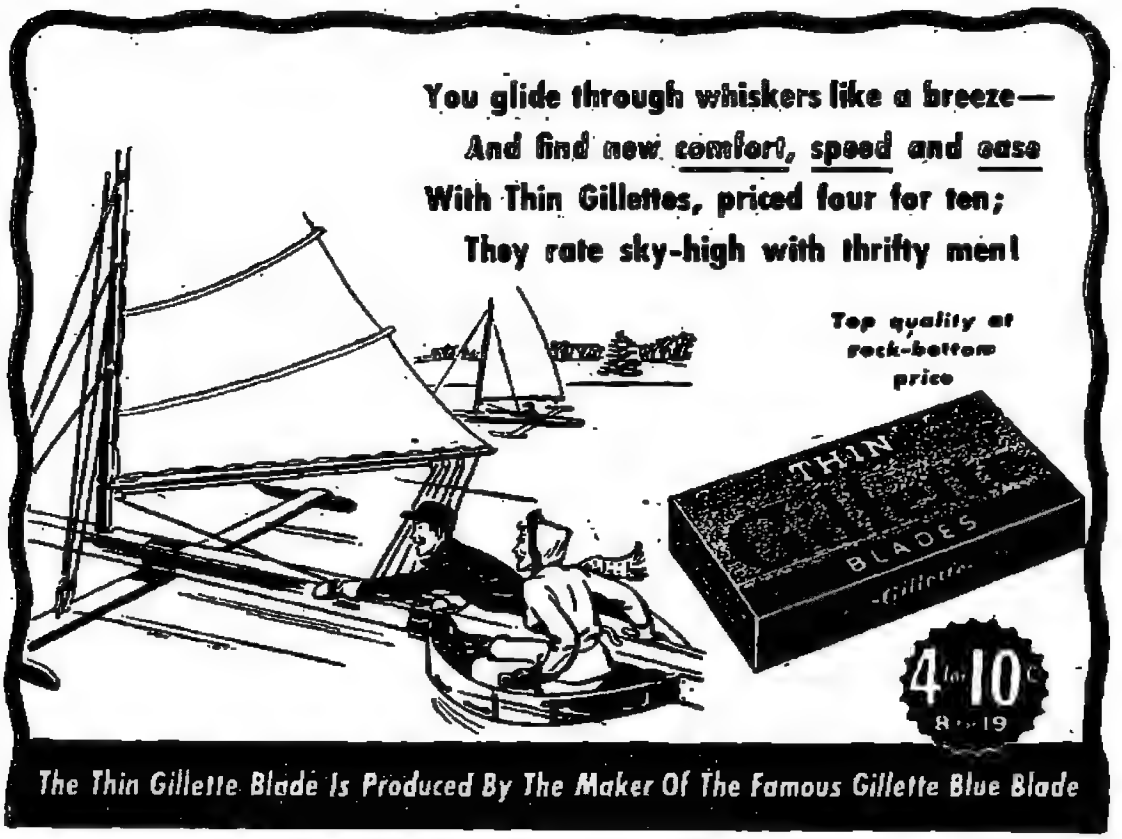
Those explorers who describe the veldt as an unbroken expanse of tan, breast-high grass have made the mistake of visiting Liberia and its neighbor, East Africa, during the dry season. We, ahem, know better, which sounds egotistical and probably is, but we have found pictures have a better market when they're teeming with broad-leaved plaintains, and shrubs, and brilliant flowers, and color splashed Toucans, and sleek, well-fed beasts and such, than when they're backgrounded with parched greenery and lions with countable ribs and shabby manes who, no matter how ferocious they actually are, look on the screen like so many left-over circus props. Besides, in the dry season the animals get downright ravenous, and I'm a poor shot and Meg is no good at all in broken field running.

The landscape shimmered before and around us and imperceptibly the clumps of trees and the spiky pampas gave ground to denser foliage and lush undulating terrain. Vines began to make their appearance, creeping snakewise up the trees to join in a thick network above our heads. Bright-plummaged

birds, like Byzantine jewels, flew among the branches, and mammoth butterflies, resting on the lichens and fungi, opened and closed their feathery wings as if to have us admire their ravishing splendor. Monkeys scolded us from the safe distance of the treetops and here and there a mischievous chap, emboldened by our lack of response, pelted us with fruit hulls. Say what you will, wild and trackless as it is, with its one law—kill or be killed, eat or be eaten—Liberia, with all its barbarity, is a paradise. A lost paradise, unbelievably beautiful and as insidious a drug as opium.

We came to the barrier at noon and I sizzled out an oath that I hadn't had sense enough to go on ahead of the march and tear it down before our blacks saw it. As barriers go, it was no great shakes. A fringe of withered vine strands tied around two tree trunks so that it blocked our barely definable path, it could have been scattered to the winds by a baby's hand. But, as far as the Swahilis went, it was as solid as a wall of reinforced cement, studded with broken glass and topped with barbed wire and Gatling guns.

I've seen these barriers before—these Forbidden Trails. As a rule, they are placed only on secluded paths that lead to the haunts of witch doctors or hogouns, or to the shelters where young boys are segregated to undergo various rites on reaching manhood. The natives believe to enter a Forbidden Trail is tantamount to spitting in Muungu's face, and Muungu is noted for his vindictiveness. One quick squint at my inky cohorts showed me they hadn't the


You glide through whiskers like a breeze—
And find new comfort, speed and ease
With Thin Gillettes, priced four for ten;
They rate sky-high with thrifty men!
Top quality at rock-bottom price
THIN
BLADES
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slightest intention of budging from the spot in any direction, except backward.

If you're wondering why I didn't tear the curtain to shreds right then and there and push on with a manly shout of "Yoicks," or "Onward, Upward Excelsior," or something, all I have to say is, don't be silly. If a twig falls the wrong way in Liberia, the fetishes have to be consulted, and there's no point in trying to hurry matters. And a Forbidden Trail loomed about as large in proportion to a twig as a milk combine does to a Hereford cow. If you follow me. I hardly do myself.

Anyway, I was adamant in my determination to proceed and reserved an aloof attitude while Wahla, with the help of a number of crinkly hairs from his head and a brace of crushed ants, asked the fetishes what they thought about it. The fetishes said, no dice.

Now, I am sure, that somewhere in my arteries and veins courses the blood of a billygoat for, when Wahla directed the abject blacks to collect our belongings and forthwith began to retrace his steps without so much as a by-your-leave, I saw red. I stopped him, took away the compass like a sergeant stripping a corporal of his rank, and gave him a verbal lacing. He was, I told him, a yellow-bellied jackal, a brainless parrot, a chicken with the spine of an angle worm, and I was glad I'd found him out. I, who had consorted with warriors, with the bravest of the brave, wouldn't defame myself by traveling in close proximity with the shadow of a suckling pig whose entrails were made of lizard droppings.

I took, snatched really, the camera from one of the Swahilis, turned on my heel and brushed through the curtain, Meg trotting happily by my side.

It wasn't as foolhardy as it seems. We were, I knew, at the most half a day's distance from the rubber plantation, and I felt reasonably sure the thread of a path we were traveling, would soon grow larger and probably be bordered by small villages. It did. And it was. Three villages in all and all deserted and all as quiet as tombs. We poked our heads in a couple of the huts. Empty. In one, a crude pot with some ground maize in it attested to the precipitous flight of its inhabitants.

"Do you feel it?" Meg asked, after we had passed the last village.

"Feel what?"

"The silence. It's like a [illegible] like a weight. A heavy, dragging weight."

"It is sort of still, isn't it?"

"Do you realize we haven't seen a bird, or a monkey, or even one of those scampering, fork-tailed scorpions? And what is most astonishing, not a single, solitary insect. I haven't had a tick bite for over four hours, and that's a record."

"Getting spooky?"

"Kind of. Are you?"

"Hm-m-m. Want to turn around?"

"Uh-huh. Do you?"

"Uh-huh."

The words were no sooner out of my mouth when Meg clutched my arm and hissed, "What was that?"

We both stood stock-still in our tracks, listening as hard as we could. Something was following in our wake. Carefully, I trained my gun on the trail behind us, annoyed to find my palms were moist.

The undergrowth moved, parted, and Wahla stepped forth. Without a word, he took the camera from me and assumed the lead. We walked on silently, the only sound being the snap of

branches swishing back into place after our passage.

After a while, Meg took the compass and returned it to Wahla, who beamed all over and said, "How do you do," which, being the only English he knew, was the essence of politeness.

WE REACHED the rubber plantation as the sun, in fiery glory, shed one final, mighty glare upon Liberia and sank, an angry red, behind the horizon.

The rubber trees began at the border of the village and extended fanwise to the edge of the sluggish Cavally, lazing against its mangrove banks. Some of the sap catchers, I noted, had fallen away from their moorings and creepers were investigating with waving tendrils their woven intricacies. The underbrush had sent up offshoots along the ground among the trees, and on a good many of the brown, smooth trunks, unhealthy clots of fungi clung like exposed brains.

With a few notable exceptions, the plantation was but a replica of the Guere villages we had traversed. One exception that smote the eye at once was an incongruous frame dwelling, around which the fiber huts were arranged symmetrically in a circle. And even more incongruous than the dilapidated clapboard house, was a mud-baked brick addition, like a sort of igloo, that quite evidently had been added as an afterthought. Another odd feature that had me stumped was the chicken wire. Every window in that fallen-to-pieces house was literally swathed in chicken wire. I don't think a mosquito could have wriggled through without skinning its wings.

Not a wreath of smoke came from any of the thatched roofs, not a chicken clucked, not a child called. Over everything hung the presence of decay and the slow, inexorable encroachment of the jungle. There was only our breathing and the *slap, slap; slap* of the river against the mossy pilings of a lopsided boathouse; its roof caved in and a creeper sticking from a window whose splintered frame stuck out stiffly like a broken finger.

It was uncanny. A row of gooseflesh made a prickly excursion along the back of my neck, and I was conscious that each one of my hairs had a separate and distinct root.

"I don't know about you," Meg said in a small voice, "but my stomach keeps clanking against my wisdom teeth."

"Well, I don't see any zombies," I responded gruffly and, showing a fearlessness entirely foreign to my actual mental state, I shoved off, chest well thrust out like a copy book print of an intrepid explorer, and lifting my feet high to escape the entangling vines, crossed the clearing, rosy in the afterglow. I nearly fell through one of the rotted steps leading up to the porch of the wooden house. Some of the two-by-fours in the flooring were missing and, looking down, I saw an ant hill, its cone blunted and crumbling into dust. Where had its busy occupants gone? And why? Above all, *why?* Why had everybody gone? Everything. Every living, crawling creature.

Raising my hand, I rapped vigorously with my knuckles on the bleached door. The sound, horribly loud in the gathering dusk, echoed away to the ends of the earth, it seemed, and the tip of a weed, sticking like a serpent's tongue through a hole in the porch, bobbed up and down as if chuckling at some diabolic secret of its own.

Then I heard footsteps inside coming closer and closer, with a reluctant obbligato played by the squeaking planks

over which they trod. They came right up to the door and stopped, and once more silence spread its hooded skirts over everything. I fancied I could *hear* someone listening beyond that weathered partition, which shows how jumpy I was.

I knocked again. "Open up," I said. "Rutherford to see Captain Langdon."

"What do you want?" came the muffled and toneless question through the flaking wood.

"I have a message from Colonel Mayhew of Rhordon."

"Mayhew?"

"Yes, of the government compound at Rhordon. Open up, will you?"

"How many are you?" asked my invisible conversationalist.

"Three."

Silence again and finally the rattle of chains and the rusty creak of a bolt sliding back. The door swung wide on protesting hinges. The whole performance was so damned eerie I think I fully expected to see something in the nature of a Boris Karloff or a Bela Lugosi in full regalia. What actually confronted me was a fly-blown edition of Adolphe Menjou in dirty pajamas, whose mustache, instead of being neat and soigné, was scraggly and tobacco-stained and whose eyes, instead of being world-weary and sophisticated, were, as Meg so succinctly put it, like two burned holes in a blanket.

"My name is Rutherford, sir," I began. "Colonel Mayhew, of the Rhordon post, requested that I"—my voice petered out under the unwavering scrutiny of those bloodshot orbs and I swallowed audibly—"deliver a message to his assistant, name of Murchison," I finished.

The beggar was clearly ill. No doubt that explained the entire situation. Some sort of plague or pestilence, as I had prophesied to Mayhew. But if it were a plague, where was the funeral pyre? And the wild life? Animals and birds and reptiles and insects aren't susceptible to plague. My thoughts ran around inside my head like so many squirrels on a treadmill.

"You are, perhaps, Murchison?" I ventured.

"No," the man replied, and he essayed an unpleasant grin, affording me a glimpse of snaggled stumps of teeth. "I am not," he said. "Murchison, indeed!" Cackling laughter welled up from his throat and choked off as abruptly as it had begun.

As I peered at him closely in the thickening gloom, my subconscious began pedalling furiously for home and mother, even while my conscious said crisply, "We have no wish to intrude, Captain Langdon. I assume you *are* Captain Langdon."

"I am."

"My message from Colonel Mayhew is for his assistant. If Mr. Murchison is unoccupied at present, I would like very much to see him."

"Why did your friends not come with you? Why do they linger behind?"

"We thought the village singularly quiet. I, as head of the party, deemed it wise to investigate first."

"Halo-o-o-o-o," Meg's voice floated across to us.

"There is a woman?"

"Mrs. Rutherford," I answered him and shouted a return halo-o-o-o to Meg.

"The other?"

"A Swahili bearer."

"No porters?"

"Our porters are waiting for us back on the trail."

"I see." Langdon made a concilia-

tory gesture. "Pray, have them come in. I shall make a light."

"Halo-o-o-o-o," Meg called again, nearer.

"All clear," I yelled. "Come ahead," and bounded down the steps to meet the dim shapes of Meg and Wahla stumbling through the carpet of creepers across the clearing.

Night was settling down in earnest. In the tropics the nights fall with startling suddenness. There is no twilight, no hazy gloaming. When the sun goes down, it goes *down*, as if it were plunged into a Brobdingnagian pail of water. Already the heavens were spangled with the first great luminous stars and all the shadows were merging together into an almost tangible solidity. And nowhere was there a sound.

"Listen," I said hurriedly on reaching Meg, "it looks on the up and up but it doesn't jell. Not with me. Langdon is one of those hermit types. Thought I was going to have to produce my birth certificate before he'd let us in. Queasy sort. Keep your eyes peeled and your trap shut. Not a word about zombies. Got it?"

"Murchison?"

"He's here, all right At least Langdon was familiar with the name. Here we go. Watch the second step. It's a shell of its former self."

"So'm I," Meg said. "Way down in my innards there's a three-bell alarm going off a mile a minute. Lord, what a swell place for a séance."

"Stow it. Here comes Langdon."

FAR DOWN a narrow hall, a sickly light bobbed toward us and so murky was the interior beyond the door it seemed to be drifting along all by itself in midair.

Langdon set the lamp on a table and came forward to greet us—if you can call the abrupt inclination of a head a greeting. He closed the door behind us, locked it; bolted it, and fastened a heavy chain across it. Then he shuffled over to a window, peered out through the wire screening, grunted to himself, approvingly as it were, rubbed his hands together, turned and said, "Sit down, sit down, sit down, si—" He broke off as his eyes lighted on our tripod and camera. "What's this?" he said sharply.

"A camera," I said.

"Why would you bring a camera here?"

"We're . . . we're connected with the Good Will Ambassadorial Missions for Historical Inquiry," I invented. It seemed as pompous a name as any. "We we take pictures of out-of-the-way places to show in ah other out-of-the-way places to promote er . . good will and . . ah fellowship." I spread my hands placatingly.

"It's as much a part of him as his Bible," Meg said demurely and sank onto a suspiciously gray settee that was bursting at the seams and leaned drunkenly to starboard.

Langdon mulled this over in his mind a few moments, darted a flickering glance at each of us in turn and, apparently satisfied with our bland countenances, subsided into a shabby Morris chair, leaking springs and sawdust.

Wahla squatted on his haunches and I selected a rickety wooden affair, with traces of gilt showing through the dirt and tested it gingerly before lowering myself into it.

"About Murchison," I began. "His superior is rather concerned over his continued absence."

Langdon flicked a speck off his filthy pajamas and said nothing.

"He thought, perhaps, he had been stricken with the fever."

Langdon merely waited.

"So, if I could see him—" My voice trailed off and I felt like a six-year-old who has been caught by an eagle-eyed teacher in the covert act of throwing a spitball.

"Unfortunately, Mr. Murchison is indisposed." The words fell like cold pellets from the thin lips.

"Then he *does* have the fever." I made a *tch-tching* noise with my tongue. "And your rubber workers? They, too, I suppose, have been—" Again my voice trailed away. Limped, rather.

The captain raised his eyebrows. "You are most inquisitive for a missionary."

"The eternal requisite of a godly man, captain," I said didactically and, slapping my knees in the manner of one who gets on with the business at hand, I stood up and said, "Now, for a look at Murchison and we'll be on our way."

Langdon made no effort to rise.

"I said Murchison was indisposed."

"Oh, come, surely he'll want to hear news of Rhordon. Perk him up a bit. Nothing like a spot of cheer for the bedfast."

"I'm sorry."

"He must be *quite* ill."

"He is."

"Well, in that case I'd *better* have a look at him. He may be sicker than you realize."

"And if he were?"

"Why, I'd . . . I'd take him back to the compound where he'd get good care."

"Tonight, my dear Rutherford?"

"If he were able."

"But if he were able, then he couldn't be sicker than I think, could he?"

Whereupon I got mad—my County Cork ancestry cropping out.

"See here," I said brusquely, dropping all pretense, "are you holding Murchison incommunicado?"

"Why should I?"

"I'm asking *are* you."

Langdon looked at me with glittering, reptilian eyes.

"Yes," he said quietly, "I am."

"O. K.," I said. "At last we know where we stand. There's just one other thing I want to know. Where are the villagers?"

"Where else but in the villages?" the captain replied with sardonic amusement.

"The villages are deserted, and you know it," I said.

"Not entirely. There are enough blacks left for my needs." He stressed the word "needs" ever so slightly.

"Your plantation is a shambles. It hasn't been worked for four months or more. You, my dear captain, are a liar."

"And you," he said evenly, "are a fool of a doubting Thomas. You wish to see, touch, and taste." He essayed a hobgoblin smile. "By Jehovah, you shall! Look."

LANGDON HEAVED himself out of his chair, went over to the window and pulled up the wooden-slatted blind. He gave a low whistle—two loonlike notes. The moon had risen and the clearing lay, a silver platter, on which the squat-thatched huts resembled the tumbled heads of so many John the Baptists. Beyond, the rubber trees were etched in black and white, with the Cavally slipping along, a silken skein in the moonlight. Beyond that was jungle, a dense wall of impenetrability soaking up the starshine like a great, dark blotter.

Langdon whistled again. The notes throbbing away into the silence. I

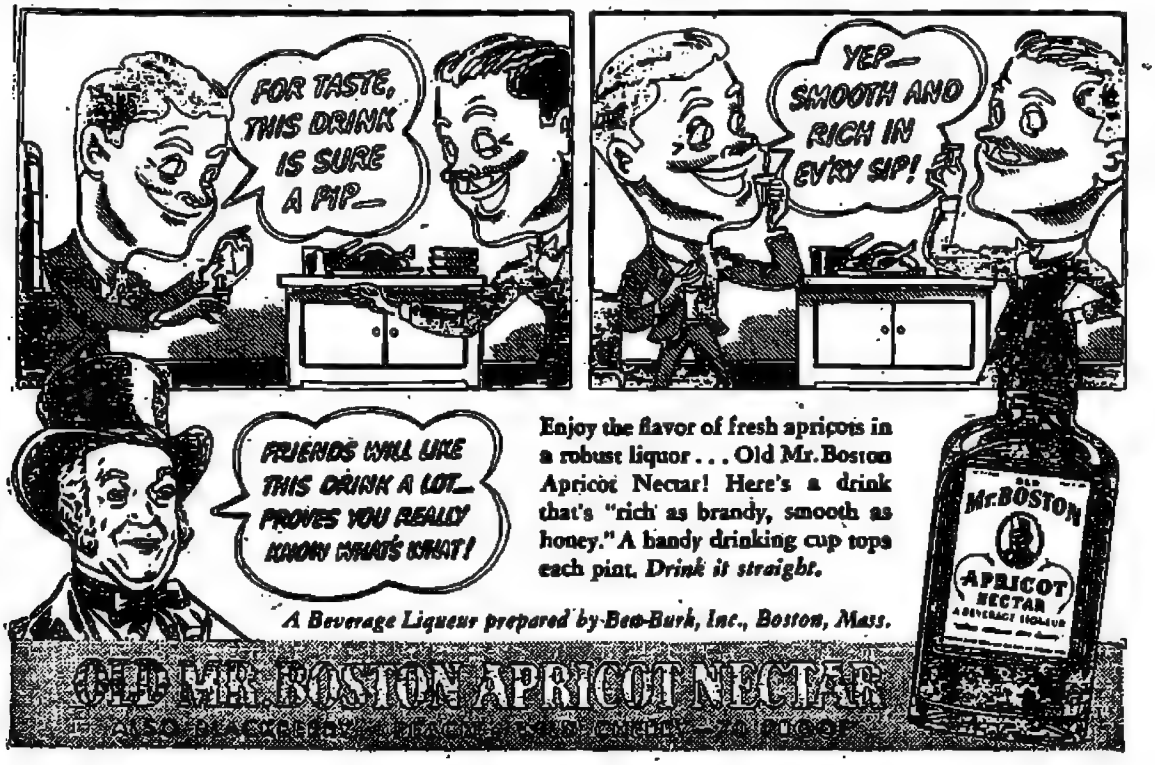
caught my breath. There were shadows on the clearing. Moving shadows. A score or more. Some gliding smoothly from sheltering hut to sheltering hut and others ground close, creeping, crawling, wriggling, as if they were blind or maimed. And there was a humming sound as if a thousand bees were fanning their wings in unison. The sound grew in volume, louder and clearer as the shadows approached. Wahla recognized it for what it was before I, and shrank back from the window with a terrified whimper. And then I got it. It was a Guere word repeated over and over.

"Meat, meat, meat, meat, meat, meat."

The first of the oncoming figures whirled into the shaft of light from the lantern and I reeled as if I had been struck. With a curse, I ripped the cord from Langdon's grasp and the shade rattled down with a clatter, but not before I was able to ascertain that, as far as eye could see and without exception, the motley horde cavorting outside was composed of the most misshapen and mutilated creatures on God's green earth. And not only that, but their hair was braided in a fashion I, in my innocence, had thought outmoded, with bones and dried reptile skins. So Mayhew was right. Cannabalism still flourished! But zombies? No. Lepers, I thought, lepers! And my blood congealed and ran backward for the space of three full seconds. Then I clapped my hand to my hip.

"Don't bother reaching for your gun," Langdon said. "I have just had the pleasure of relieving you of it."

I stared down into the blue nose of


OLD MR. BOSTON SAYS: "MY APRICOT NECTAR IS SURE TO PLEASE YOU!"
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YEP— SMOOTH AND RICH IN EV'RY SIP!
FRIENDS WILL LIKE THIS DRINK A LOT— PROVES YOU REALLY KNOW WHAT'S WHAT!
Enjoy the flavor of fresh apricots in a robust liquor . . . Old Mr. Boston Apricot Nectar! Here's a drink that's "rich as brandy, smooth as honey." A handy drinking cup tops each pint. Drink it straight.
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OLD MR. BOSTON APRICOT NECTAR
OLD MR. BOSTON
APRICOT NECTAR

my own Luger. If ever a man felt like a complete dunderhead, that man was I. To have played into Langdon's hands with such utter lack of forethought! I called upon my Maker in no uncertain terms and with lurid, detailed instructions.

Meg, huddled against the sofa, looked almost transparent.

"Is it *them?*" she asked, her eyes like round delft saucers.

"Them?" Langdon queried.

"The zombies.. Meg said and immediately put her hands over her mouth as if to push the words back in again.

"So," Langdon said. "Missionaries!" And his voice sounded like the wet, slimy chains of a windlass coiling up from the dank pit of a well. "You came here to steal my experiments. You came deliberately to take what is mine." His voice rose shrilly. "Mine! You would sneak, with trickery and lies, and pilfer a lifetime of research." A knotted vein pulsated in his temple.

I thought, "Here goes nothing," and braced myself for the tearing rip of a soft-slugged bullet. But, as abruptly as Langdon's passion had flared, it died.

"You will go upstairs," he said calmly, "and wait until I am ready." He lifted the outer corners of his lips in a mirthless smile. "I assure you, you will not wait long."

"Just a minute," I said. "*Are* those zombies?"

"Zombies!" The captain spat at my feet. "They are guinea pigs who have served to further a discovery that will make medical history for all time. An experiment that will rock the world and shake the foundations of empires. My name will go down in indelible letters of gold throughout the length and breadth of every land." He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "And you would filch it from me." A chuckle started in his throat and burst in a gurgling bubble from between his twisted lips. "You, also, shall further the cause of science. Come, my guinea pigs." He picked up the lamp and motioned us ahead with the gun.

NUMBLY, as in a dream, we were prodded up some dismal stairs and down a wretched hall from which ancient newspapers hung in dangling strips like imitation seaweed, showing underneath the plastered ribs of the derelict house. The hungry, whining chant of the savages outside resounded in our ears.

Langdon pushed open a warped door and proceeded to light the chipped twin of his lantern. The flame sputtered, grew steady, and emitted a bilious glow that didn't reach anywhere near the corners which were shrouded in dusty obscurity and festooned with ropy cobwebs. A tarnished brass bed, with a greasy ticking atop it, hugged one wall and a cane-bottomed chair, the seat splintered and sagging, hugged the bed. A once-white china pitcher hugged a paintless washstand. And Meg hugged

Wahla, his skin the color of weak cocoa, kept as far away from the captain as the confines of the room would permit.

Langdon encompassed our "living-statuary" tableau with a gloating leer that would have turned Charles Laughton a deep shade of envious chartreuse.

"I wouldn't attempt escape," he said. "It would be most unhealthy. My villagers are quite, *quite* hungry." Softly he closed the door. There was a clank as a bolt was shot home, hard. His footsteps scraped away and clopped down the clacking board stairs.

I disengaged myself from Meg's em-

brace and began taking the bed to pieces and hefting the assorted lengths of brass to see which was the heaviest.

"Tony," Meg said, "will zombies obey just anybody or only one person?"

"They're not zombies," I said. "There's no such thing as a zombie. They're lepers."

"Oh."

There was a long pause and then, in a tiny voice, Meg said, "Is it catching?"

"I don't know," I said, weighing a rod experimentally and rejecting it. "I've never met anybody, up until now, that had it."

"What do you think Langdon's 'research' is?"

"I don't know. Some cure for leprosy, I guess."

"What do you think he's going to do with us?"

"Meg, for Heaven's sake, *I don't know.*"

"Well, I just asked."

A long while later Meg said, "If if we shouldn't manage to get out from under this one, you wouldn't . . . I want you to . . . that is . . . what I mean is you'll see they don't get me alive won't you?"

"You mean you want me to conk you on the bean? Sure thing," I said absently, selecting a good-sized chunk of brass and swishing it like a baseball bat.

"You're certainly nonchalant about it," Meg said. "You almost act as if you were pleased at the Heaven-sent opportunity. Do you prefer a rear view while striking, or will a profile be more effective?"

Wahla, in the corner, whimpered and with one extended, quivering finger, pointed to the door. Meg's mouth formed a frozen O, and my rebuttal to her last verbal sword thrust, remained forever unborn. My eyes glued themselves fast to the doorknob which turned ever so slowly and was released.

In a flash, I was pressed against the peeling wood.

"Who's there?" I called softly.

There was no reply. Only the painful inching back of the bolt on the other side.

"Who's there?" I tried again in the slurred guttural accents of Guereian. And, inch by inch, I could hear the bolt sliding back.

"We are friends," I said, "we bring many gifts."

There was a sharp snick as the bolt was released and then a kind of plop as if something had dropped down.

"Stay as you are," I cautioned Meg and Wahla and, grasping my brass blackjack tightly, I stepped close to the jamb, flattening myself against the wall.

The door opened a crack, widened, and Wahla, with an inarticulate moan, buried his face in his hands while Meg went "peep"—just like that—under the impression that she was screaming.

THE THING that crept over the sill into the room was beyond my powers of description. Even now, sitting here in the study, surrounded by familiar objects and with a crackling log fire scattering cheer across the rugs and burnishing the paneling into a satiny patina, I find my flesh crawling and have to fight down a well-nigh irresistible desire, panic if you will, to peer under the tables. I concentrate on the ivory fish, the crystal horns of plenty on the mantelpiece, spilling their delicate tracery of ivy, and I mash out another cigarette in an ashtray already full to overflowing and wonder if I'll *ever* be able to erase the memory of that grotesque

caricature of a man worming across the musty floor in the pale glow of the smoking lantern.

I'll give it to you quick. Short, snappy sentences and be done with it. His face was a sickly yellow and sort of drifted to leeward, as if it had become unfastened from the bony structure underneath. That is, the skin itself was pendulous appearing to hang supported from the temples alone. He was clad in a tattered pair of trousers. No shirt. From the elbows down his arms were bone. Just bone. I'll not put down what it was like *above* the elbows. And what I could see of his legs below the faded pants were bone. Just bone. And those bones moved. They co-ordinated. They scratched against the boards of the floor and one white-jointed finger made a quieting motion. Two agonized eyes, very blue, looked straight up into mine.

I closed the door. Murchison relaxed. For that thing *was* Murchison. I knew it for a deadly certainty. He moistened his cracked lips with a swollen tongue and spoke. Have you ever heard speech attempted by anyone who has just had his tonsils removed? That was it. A hollow, ghost of a voice that lent the impression the windpipe itself was scraped raw. The words were spaced far apart and were few. This is what he said.

"Solutions cabinet. Destroy. Paper burn papers."

"What cabinet?" I asked, kneeling and subjecting that loathsome form to a searching scrutiny.

"In lab—" The grisly fingers tapped on the floor. "Lab—"

Gritting my teeth, I picked up one of those arms and flexed it. The head rolled flabbily from side to side.

"Burn . . . papers . . don't . . . wait."

I pushed up the man's pants and examined his legs. Carefully, then, I pulled the trousers down and stared for a long moment at the walls.

"Don't look like that," Meg said. "Don't, Tony."

"I'll be back," I said and rose.

"What is it? Where are you going? Don't leave me, Tony, don't leave me," Meg cried and ran to throw her arms around me. "I won't be left here, I won't, I won't," she said over and over.

There was no time to argue. I gathered that thing up off the floor, spoke swiftly to Wahla, telling him to stick close, and carrying Murchison as if he were a child—and truly he weighed little more—I made for the stairway. Meg, holding the lantern aloft, almost tread on my heels.

We walked in a yellow pool of light and the darkness retreated before us only to close in behind as we passed. Vaguely I knew we were making a hell of a lot of noise lumbering down the shaky stairs and over the dried-out boards in the hallway beneath, but my brain was in such a turmoil and was so overwhelmingly full of a sickening dread into which I dared not probe, that I didn't care. I felt as if I were walking in a charmed circle that not even Langdon could break, and I made my way unerringly in the direction of the discordant brick addition that had attracted our attention from the clearing.

Silence held the house in thrall. We traversed the corridor without challenge, made a right-angled turn and were brought up short by a heavy door made of plated sheet iron. This, then, was the lab. By some stroke of for-

tune almost too good to be true, the door was ajar. I strode inside, still carrying my hideous burden, Meg and Wahla crowding in behind.

"Stand where you are, don't move," Langdon said from his hiding place behind the half-opened door.

It *had* been too good to be true. I had stepped into a trap. A trap baited with Murchison. My arms went slack and Murchison slipped to the earthen flooring, groveling in the dirt like a craven beast. Covering us with my Luger, Langdon kicked the door shut with his heel.

"So nice of you to co-operate," he said tonelessly. "I would have hated an attempted break on the stairs which would have necessitated shooting one, or two, or maybe the three of you. Sudden, violent death would have hampered my schedule. This way I will have all three of you safe and sound of wind and limb, with no repairs to be made before rigor mortis sets in." And, without raising his voice, "You will kindly throw your brass bludgeon in the far corner."

I did. And pushed Meg behind me.

"Langdon," I said, "we're going to have this out. Now. What hellish thing have you stumbled on?" I mo-

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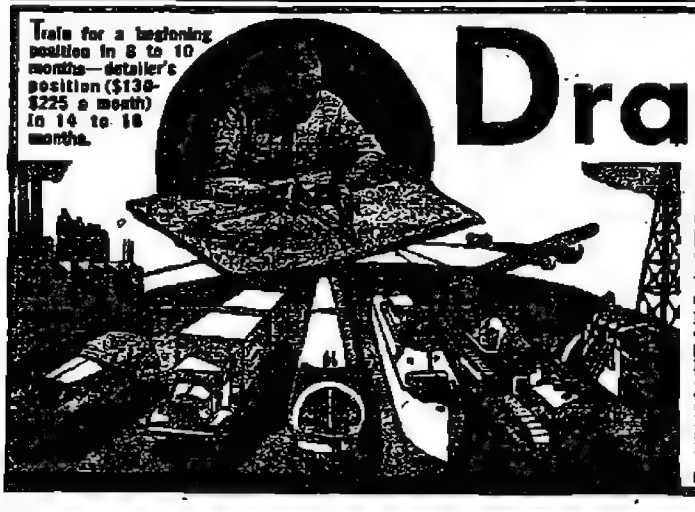

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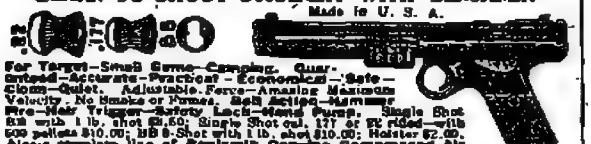

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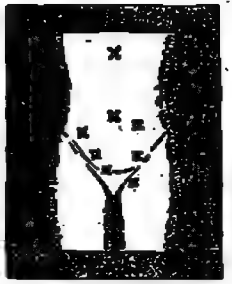

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tioned toward Murchison squirming across the hard clay floor toward the door. "That's not leprosy."

"I didn't say it was."

"Then, in Heaven's name, what is it!"

"You shall soon know," Langdon said. "And I see no harm in explaining." It was plainly evident that he was enjoying himself hugely. "It's quite simple, really. So long as the blood stream is unimpaired and the organs are not diseased or injured, a body lives. Therefore"—Langdon stabbed the air with a grimy forefinger—"it follows that, if caught in time, in time, mind you, and split seconds count, a dead body with a diseased organ can be returned to full vigor *if* that organ is replaced with a healthy one."

"Are you trying to tell me Murchison and those Guere natives have had some vital organ replaced after death and have been successfully resuscitated!"

"I am not trying to tell you, Rutherford. I *am* telling you.

"I don't believe it," I said flatly.

LANGDON jerked Murchison off the floor by the scruff of his neck and yanked back the flaccid head. Those fleshless limbs twitched spasmodically like a dog with chorea and then, blue eyes glistening with hate, Murchison held himself still, as if by so doing, he would avoid abuse, while Langdon indicated a scar at the base of Murchison's throat.

"A Guere windpipe is in there," he said.

"What happened to Murchison's windpipe?"

"Unfortunately, it was torn from his throat by the teeth of one of those natives you hear, if you listen closely, outside the building."

"How? Or, should I say, why?"

"Why? Because he underestimated his running ability and refused to be-

lieve me when I told him my Gueres were very, very hungry." He flung Murchison down and wordlessly the man began again his patient, sinuous twisting along the floor toward the door.

"I hardly think, captain, your discovery will be hailed with great fanfare and conclave if your your clients will have the appearance of Murchison. He is not what you might call in 'good condition.' Nor are your Gueres. Quite the opposite, in fact."

"That, I will overcome eventually," Langdon said. "Rome wasn't built in a day."

"These so-called solutions of yours, then, are not perfected."

Langdon smote a lopsided roll-top desk, whose pigeonholes bristled with papers.

"They are!" he snarled. "It's this blasted climate that eats the tissues off their bones and bloats them up with rot. It's the infernal miasma off those mangrove swamps and the bloody heat, heat, *heat*. Day in, day out. Heat. Death and heat. Death and heat." He stopped, blinked his eyes and said, "But you shall see for yourselves. Each of you."

"What do you propose to do?"

"I intend to kill you. Carefully, ever so carefully, so as not to spoil you."

"And you think we shall stand calmly by and let you?"

"You will have no alternative."

"But to be forced into shooting us would ruin your plans. You said so yourself."

"Not ruin. Hamper. You forget Mr. Murchison's Guere windpipe. I have, should necessity arise, five or more blacks in a fairly normal state of preservation and they would do as patchwork."

"You realize, of course, that if we fail to report to Rhordon, Mayhew will leave no stone unturned to get to the bottom of this."

"Mayhew be damned. *I* am the law, here."

"The government thinks differently."

"The *government* be damned."

Watching us, he edged over to a steel cabinet against the wall and pulled out a drawer with his free hand. Bottles clinked together and he withdrew two filled with a foamy, liverish liquid. With a Bunsen burner, he lighted a small sterilizer such as you see in doctor's offices and, never relaxing his guard, proceeded to fill it with—of all things—cotton in perforated boxes.

"It is of the utmost importance to stuff all the openings of the body," he said.

"What are we going to do?" Meg breathed down my neck.

"I play tackle, you run."

"It won't do to try a break for the door, Mr. Rutherford," Langdon said, "if that's what you're mumbling about. I'm an excellent shot. And this is, so I have ascertained, a repeater."

"Murchison made it, I see," I said, nodding at the two pony feet sliding out the door.

"Murchison sleeps under the cookstove." He laughed shortly. "It keeps his bones warm."

"When he lowers the lid on the sterilizer," I said out of the corner of my mouth to Meg, "don't look, just run."

LANGDON put the two bottles side by side in a metal bracket and attached the bracket to the Bunsen burner. The liquid began to clear. He lowered the top of the sterilizer.

"Now!" I yelled to Meg and dove for

Langdon's legs. At that moment I wouldn't have traded my backfield training at Dartmouth for all the Greek or Latin that has ever been written.

A bullet sang past my cheek and I had Langdon's thin shanks in my grip with all my weight behind it. A keen pain pierced my shoulder simultaneously with a bark from the Luger and then Langdon and I were rolling on the floor, struggling for a vulnerable hold.

I was conscious of a little, half-stifled cry from Meg.

"Run," I shouted, digging Langdon's thumbs out of my eyes.

She did. Straight for us. Reached us. And whacked her lantern across Langdon's head. It had about as much effect as a mosquito bite. But the lantern broke with a pop like a split electric bulb. Kerosene sprayed and a thin trickle slipped in eddies and whirls across the floor to a straw mat spread under the swivel chair by the roll-top desk.

A blue tongue of fire danced its way along that oily stream, licked at the matting, the tongue became a red bush, blossomed up the sides of the desk. The pigeonholed papers began to curl inward. Langdon wrenched himself free and staggered to the desk, beating at the flames with his bare hands. Sparks swirled like angry lightning bugs and the grass-caulked walls caught and blazed. With a gush, the whole interior of the place was an inferno and, somehow, Meg and I were out in the hallway, running like mad. Wahla's breechclout bobbing ahead of us like a rabbit's tail.

A bullet whizzed through the air over our heads. We gained the door, tore at the bolts, got them unfastened, turned the iron key, and raced outside as another bullet embedded itself in the molding. And then, believe it or not, I came very near strangling with laughter. Wahla, the bearer in him still functioning on sixteen cylinders, had snaffled my camera as he breezed by and bore it aloft triumphantly, hurtling the steps in one bound.

"The river," I roared. "Make for the river."

I cast a hasty glance backward. The sightless windows were beginning to have a pinkish tinge and silhouetted against the deeper pink of the door stood Langdon. Above the crackle of flames two clear, loonlike notes floated to us, and from around the sides of the burning house poured that yelling band of savages.

"Meat, meat, meat, meat."

Another whistle resounded behind us. We'd never make it. Never in the wide world. Our boots tangled clumsily in the creepers and we tripped with every step.

I threw another look over my shoulder. And halted.

The Gueres, confused and frightened by the fire, were darting aimlessly this way and that, stumbling over the deformed bodies of their comrades who were unable to stand erect, and dragged themselves along on mutilated stumps. But more than that, my attention was centered on Langdon, who had descended the steps and was laying about him right and left with my piece of brass bed and bellowing exhortations at the natives to pursue us.

Behind Langdon, deadly purpose in every line of that tormented, writhing figure, crawled Murchison. He moved crabwise, slowly but surely, and closed the space between himself and the captain.

With a Herculean effort, he pushed himself to his knees, grabbed Langdon around the chest, pinioning his arms to his sides, and pulling him down.

"Meat, meat, meat, meat, meat," he screamed and sank his teeth into Langdon's throat. In an instant, the two threshing figures were buried under a shrieking mass of blood-lustful, black savagery.

I quelled a rising nausea and turned away to find Meg—camera tilted unsteadily on its tripod—grinding out the reel of film! And she actually kicked like a bucking steer when I picked her up bodily and bore her away.

It was Wahla who herded us to the river's edge by the wrecked hulk of the boathouse which yielded up a logy and leaking native perahu. It was Wahla, also, who pointed the boat upstream, saying, "Wind, she not blow this way," and it was Wahla who patched up my shoulder wound with my underwear and set Meg to bailing with a rusty, dented bucket, and who got us past the mangrove snags and who, alone, deserves all the credit and the glory and the trumpeting for keeping us from being either cremated or drowned.

It took us three weeks by river to reach Haman, and another week overland to reach Grand Bassam. And there we were received with many exclamations and much throwing up of hands and excited palaver, as it seems we had been given up for lost in the Bandigara fire.

Dmigne and his brethren had returned to their native kampongs in northern Liberia, some two hundred miles distant. Our films and equipage had never been heard of in Grand Bassam, although one greybeard, recently come from Maynad, volunteered the information that he had seen Dmigne with his own two eyes and Dmigne had had

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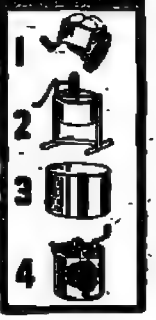

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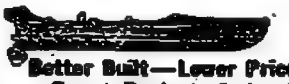

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a magic box that made sweet sounds as of the sighing wind, and had, also, strings and strings, more than fingers, or toes, or pig tick bites, of snakeskin grigris and the like of which was extremely strange that rattled when it was touched.

"Our panthers, and wildebeeste, and tribal customs. One hundred and fifty reels of them," Meg said resignedly. But to bolster Wahla's spirits, who seemed to take it as a personal "loss of face," she added, "But the one reel we did get is worth more than all of them."

Then came the bombshell. Wahla had, only that morning, presented *that* reel to Muungu as a reward for giving us a safe journey.

"Where was it. Quick! Where?"

"In the Gulf of Guinea, whose waters are fed by the Cavally which Muungu had chastened for our passage. The watch that did not tick but told the true path had directed him. Wahla said, "even as it had directed the Tuan before him."

We caught the first steamer home. I didn't return to Rhordon. I wrote Mayhew and gave him the details. And he wrote back and said undoubtedly my surmise was correct—Langdon had been trafficking in the smuggling of lepers away from Malai, the island colony off the Ivory Coast.

I don't know.

Do you?

Meg has just come in to plant a kiss on my forehead and say, "Hurry, darling, or we'll be late."

She is wearing a black velvet coat with ermine tails and one of those do-funnys that hang down like a limp hat in back. And she is looking at me with a puzzled, puckery frown, wondering what I am chortling about.

THE END.

The Moving Finger Writes,

---AND HAVING WRIT---

The steam bug will bite you if you don't watch out!

My dear Mr. Campbell:

I have just finished the October Unknown—and if I may submit my comment I will do so while the spell is on me. "The Wheels of If" is first, and I fairly reveled in it. However, I am going to take several pot shots at Mr. de Camp on the subject of steam cars. "At the curb stood a well-streamlined automobile. The engine seemed to be in the rear. From the size of the closed-in section, Park guessed it to be huge. They got in. The instrument board had more knobs and dials than a transport plane."

That's where I bog down. Why the ornate panel? If Mr. de Camp has ever been in a steamer, he would find that such is not the case. My own Stanley—which is old, being a 1921 touring car—has a steam gauge, a fuel pressure gauge, a battery charge ammeter, an oil pressure indicator for the cylinder lubricator, and four toggle switches. I submit that that is a darn sight simpler than a 1940 dashboard. And mine is far from being a modern car. A present day steam passenger car would be even simpler. I have driven a roadster built in 1936 which would run rings around my Stanley, and its dashboard was positively bare, there being only a small two-inch-diameter steam gauge, a cylinder oil indicator and an ammeter on it.

"Park guessed it to be huge." Well, Park guessed wrong, if there is to be any parallel between existing steam-car practice and that existing in Park's particular plane of probability. The engine and boiler together of a Stanley would fit under the hood of a present-day internal-combustion car. In fact, beneath the grossly long, high hoods on present-day "Streamlined"—beamlined, I call them—cars, it would be possible to put a tremendously powerful steam plant. However, with conventional steam car practice, it is not necessary to worry about jamming the engine and the boiler *under the same hood.* The engine and differential are usually one unit, suspended at the forward end by a spring link and at the after end, the weight being carried by the rear axle. Thus the boiler may be placed in any convenient place remaining. Most steamers have it under the front hood. Although one interesting car, which I had the privilege of seeing in various stages of construction, had the boiler in the rear luggage compartment of a sedan body.

"—wagging a huge tail of water vapor."

Why? It seems inconsistent to me that a people capable of constructing streamlined steam-propelled road vehicles, would be unaware of surface condensers. Condensing the exhaust was perhaps the earliest feature of the west-European steam engine. At first in the cylinder itself, as in Newcomen's engine, but soon after its introduction, James Watt patented the separate condenser. However, Watt's condenser was a jet condenser, and as such has no parallel to a surface condenser in construction. Samuel Hall's patent—British—No. 6556 of February 18, 1834, was one of the most interesting ever taken out in connection with steam power. It included the combination of a tubular condenser, a vacuum pump, a cooling water circulator pump, as well as several typically marine features such as an evaporator or distiller, and a steam saver to condense the steam blown off from the safety valve and thus save the precious fresh water.

The pioneer transatlantic steamships, *Sirius* and *British Queen*, were equipped with surface condensers. Unfortunately, the surface condensing principle was abandoned soon after and not revived until after 1860, from which time on, the surface condenser has been an integral part of every large steam-powered plant, whether at sea or on land. It is interesting to note that it was an American who organized and founded the company which owned the pioneer transatlantic "commercial passenger ship" the *Sirius*. The man was Junius Smith of Plymouth, Massachusetts, and the company was The British and American Steam Navigation Co.

The surface condenser was abandoned for the time in these early days of steam, due to the fact that its tubes became clogged with tallow which was so freely used to lubricate the internal moving parts of the engines and was, as a result, carried over to the condenser by the exhaust steam. After 1860, petroleum base lubricants were introduced, instead of animal and vegetable oils, and once more the surface condenser came into general use and assumed its place of great importance in the thermodynamic cycle. I seem to have digressed to great length; please excuse it. I only wished to show that some sort of condenser is as normal to a steam vehicle as the boiler. The condenser on Stanley steamers was introduced in 1910 or '12 and consisted of a heavily built tubular radiator located in the normal place for radiators. A cast-aluminum manifold on the top of the radiator distributed the steam to the tubes and the radiator drained the condensate by gravity to the water tank under the floor boards.

"Hence—the complex controls." I resent this. In general the controls of any steam machine are simpler than those of a corresponding internal combustion engine of comparable power and usage. To compare the Stanley again. My car has only a throttle, a reverse pedal—in the same place that the clutch is in a gas car—and, of course, brakes, both hand and foot operated. There are no other controls outside of a steering wheel, which is taken for granted; and the main burner fuel valve, which can hardly be called a control, inasmuch as it is turned on when you start out in the morning, and turned off when you put the car away in the evening.

Perhaps I have carried this thing too far, after all it is only a story, though it is as real as life itself to me as I read it. I might close the whole thing by saying, that there are few things as enjoyable as getting into your trusty "Wain" with a good head of steam up, the needle of the steam gauge hovering at the six-hundred-pound mark, and noiselessly, seemingly without the intervention of any mechanical means, you roll away from the curb, as smoothly as a yacht leaving its moorings. You can pass it off by saying that once bitten by the steam car bug, a cure is difficult!

"Fruit of Knowledge" was second and handled the old theme of Genesis and Exodus very deftly. I wonder if there are not some other Biblical scenes that might not be handled in a similar manner, provided that this one meets with affirmative reader response. I can think of several that I would like to see in later issues of Unknown.

"The Devil's Rescue" is good, but did not appeal to me as much as it should have, considering the author. Perhaps that is because I have read several yarns written around the "Flying Dutchman" which still sticks in some back recess of my memory.

"Warm Dark Places" was really a first-class chiller. The crawly things gave me a case of the horrors, and I now carefully knock out each shoe before putting it on. To anyone who has picked eight-inch-long tropical leeches off his legs—being careful not to leave the jaws in the wound as it will cause blood poisoning—or who has stepped barefoot on a small octopus while wading, or who has put on a shoe before the tarantula therein was given a dispossess notice, the story was vividly horrible.

"The Haters" was a good short short, It carried the suspense well toward the end, and the surprise denouement was clever.

So much for October. Unknown is panning out splendidly and the new "sober" covers are well in keeping with the far superior grade of fiction within.—Wynne M. Trenholme, 68 Seaview Avenue, Dongan Hills, S. I., N. Y.

More of Harold Shea coming up.

Dear Mr. Campbell:

"Unknown marches on!" With the new book type format Unknown takes another step forward toward loftiness. However, the new-found dignity ends with main novel. Turn one more page over and we are back to the pulps again. My suggestion would be to continue the same format throughout.

"The Devil Makes the Law" was written in such a matter-of-fact way that Heinlein had me believing in Magic Incorporated. It had me snickering in spots and held my interest all the way through, but it wasn't as good as "The Mathematics of Magic." I read that one straight through at one sitting on the train. I was smiling genially as I read until I came to where Chalmers changed the water to Scotch. That one caught my funny bone and I let out a guffaw you could hear from one end of the car to the other. I turned a shade better than crimson and went on reading sheepishly as all eyes turned my way. But as time passed I couldn't suppress the chuckles, giggles and various other exclama-

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tions of mirth. More than once I noticed somebody craning his neck to catch the title of the publication that could provoke such merriment in times like these. I bet you gained at least a half a dozen new readers that day.

Those letters panning "Fear" got under my skin. To my way of thinking it is the best story you have printed yet. The reasons for its dislike were so silly. Variety is the spice of life—to coin a phrase—and that story was certainly different! All right, so maybe you did learn something about psychology, that was the easiest learning you'll ever do.

The art department is doing very well for itself inside nowadays. Cartier gets steadily better—don't ever lose him—and Kramer has a very pleasing style. Isip is just so-so. But no Finlay—how come? We want Finlay.—Bob Camden, 7957 N. Damen Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Hubbard's working on another novel.

Dear Editor Campbell:

"Darker Than You Think," a thrilling and superb winner, shows proof of serious thinking and careful study of a subject often scoffed at. I've never read anything—not even in Unknown—that made me stop and think in such a forceful manner as this novel did, nor have I had the pleasure of reading a tale with "fanciful" characters and action that was "put forward" on such realistic terms. The illustrations are back to the style of "Sinister Barrier" days, and I can't say that I have any firm objection; we now have a greater variety of drawings and more of them. The artist did both the dragon and the Messiah expertly, and these were the best in the issue. Have you ever noticed Cartier's quality of making his nudes appear as fey as any elf in a fairy dell?

In second we have Hubbard's latest—"Typewriter in the Sky." This is another step in the flight of career, and although his stories seem to be following a well-planned formula no matter what the subject, this one still was spiced with a bit of originality and some clever assumptions were voiced. The inclusion of various human beings in the events of the story added interest. One of my favorite series is the "Quick-quilt" one, and the pathetic witch and her only friend are in third. Good humor and horror and O'Henry is "Threshold."—C. Hidley, New York, New York.

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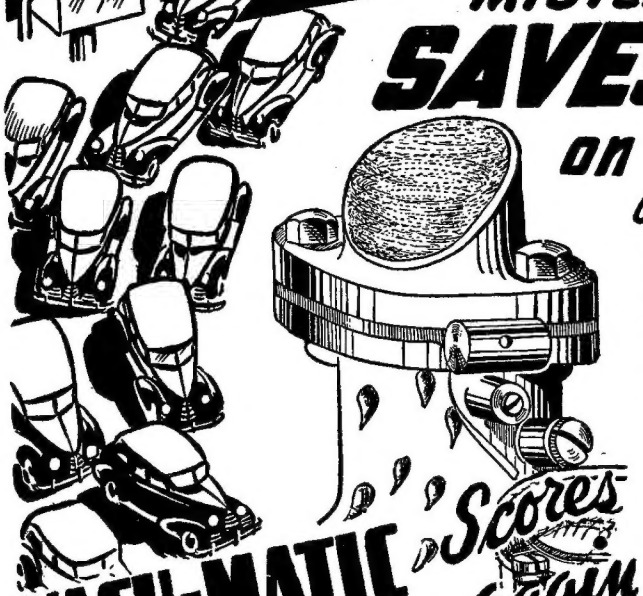

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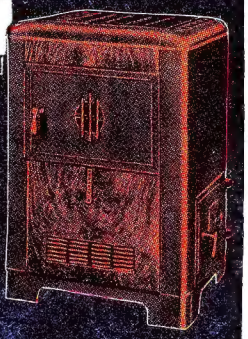

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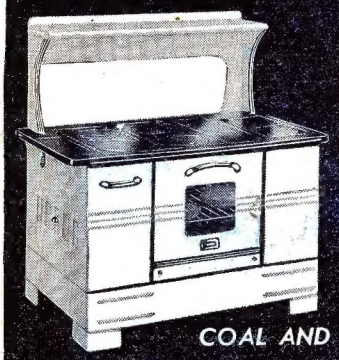

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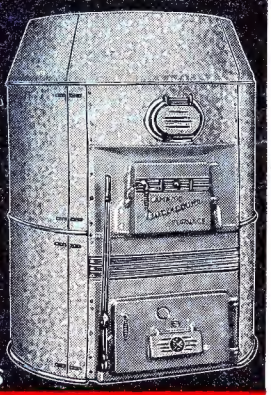

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